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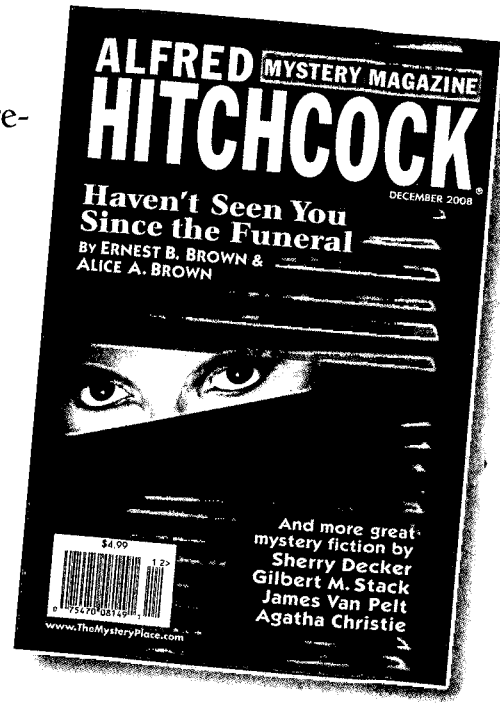

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PETER KANTER
Publisher

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE
CONNIE GOON
Advertising Sales Coordinator
Phone: (212) 686-7188
Fax: (212) 686-7414
(Display and Classified Advertising)

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Art by Laurie Harden

What's It Worth?

by Melodie Johnson Howe

Emma Parker had left her keys in her front door. Since I was meeting her for lunch I used them to let myself in. I found her in the living room. Wearing a faded blue chenille bathrobe, she was on her hands and knees, peering under the sofa. The sofa looked like it came right out of a 'forties movie with its big green-leaf print fabric. I imagined Eve Arden and Joan Crawford sitting on it, sharing snappy dialogue.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

She peered over her shoulder at me. A thick strand of henna-colored hair flopped across her check. "My self-worth." Emma was an actress. "And those." Her tired green eyes focused on the keys dangling from my hand.

"You left them in the front door," I explained.

Staying on the floor, she leaned her back against the couch. "Oh man, I'm such a mess, Diana. We were supposed to have lunch, weren't we?"

"You wanted to talk about Lund? I think you referred to him as that son-of-a-bitch director who fired you." I set the keys on the coffee table.

Emma and I had both read for the part of Livonia in Lund Hagan's movie. Despite the character's exotic name, it was the typical dutiful-wife role, which means there is very little dialogue and the actress stands around looking loving, worried, and makes a lot of coffee. But the movie was directed by Hagan, who was known for his taste and intelligence. A rare commodity in Hollywood. He was also known for being a narcissistic bastard who was dif-

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ficult to work with. Not a rare commodity in Hollywood. Emma got the part. Two days into shooting, Lund Hagan had fired her. This is the kind of blow to an actress's career and ego that makes waitressing look good.

"Oh God, I'm so hung over." Emma held her head in her hands. Then she anxiously peered up at me. "Do you mind if we don't have lunch? I'm not feeling well."

"No, of course not. Can I get you anything?"

As she struggled to her feet the bedroom door opened, and Lund Hagan sauntered in buttoning his black shirt. His black leather jacket was slung over his arm. At least his jeans were zipped up. The director was a tall, aloofly handsome man in his early fifties, with thick blond hair fading to white. His blue eyes were as warm as two ice cubes. Right now he had the conceited look of having just signed a multi-million-dollar contract, or of having had a great night in bed. It was hard to tell which. These expressions can be interchangeable in Hollywood.

In addition to being a former movie actress, a much-lauded novelist (Edgar, Anthony, and Agatha award nominated), and one of the mystery genre's best short story writers, Melodie Johnson Howe is now a blogger (whose columns you can read at www.criminalbrief.com every Tuesday) and a teacher of mystery and suspense writing. Her new story for *EQMM* brings back series character Diana Poole, whose dry wit about the Hollywood scene makes all of her adventures entertaining. †

"Diana Poole," he said, surprised. We shook hands awkwardly.

"I was just on my way out," I said.

"On your way out?" he repeated, smiling haughtily. "You should never say that in Hollywood. It might come true. You won't tell anyone that you saw me here, will you?" He meant his wife, the producer of his films, and his mistress, the biggest casting director in town.

"This is so embarrassing." Emma slumped onto the sofa.

Ignoring Lund, I said, "I'll talk to you later, Emma."

"I'm sorry, Diana," I heard her say as I left the house.

In my car I wondered why Emma had gone to bed with Lund Hagan. Surely she didn't think she'd get her part back. I looked at my watch. I had a callback for a TV commercial at two-thirty, so I had a couple of hours to kill. I decided to go to Saks, and buy moisturizer. It was all I could afford.

My husband, Colin, died suddenly of a heart attack about a year ago and left me with no life insurance. He did leave me with our house—now referred to by the realtors as a tear-down—in Malibu; an old green Jag that blew hot air from its vents no matter what the weather was; and two Oscars. Colin had won each for best screenplay. He also left me with an empty spot where my heart should be. I had been an actress before I married Colin, and now I'd gone back to acting in an attempt to keep the life that he and I had loved. Of course I was older now and the competition for my kind of role was brutal.

Standing at the makeup counter in Saks, I looked at my reflection in the counter mirror and wondered why they always tilted these things so you saw your neck, chin, and nostrils. My hair was determinedly blond and my eyes blue.

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A pretty face that was becoming more set in its ways. Less optimistic. Less adaptable. Again I thought of Emma. Maybe she did think she'd get her part back. Desperation can do that to you.

Completing my purchase, I let the escalator drift me upstairs. With my little Saks bag in hand, I wandered around staring at the expensively dressed mannequins. I became aware of other females roaming and looking. Did they just have time on their hands? Or were they Madame Bovarys searching for that perfect dress for the perfect romantic lover? The perfect romantic dream.

It was then I saw Carol Hagan, Lund's wife. She was with Val Franz, his mistress. A saleslady was ushering them toward the dressing rooms. They were the last two women on earth I wanted to encounter. I ducked behind a tall rack of evening gowns, hiding as if I'd done something wrong. While being slashed by sequins, I tried to figure out the implications of a wife and mistress shopping together. When did sequins make a comeback?

"Diana?" Carol's voice cut through the cushy silence. She swiftly parted the hangers on the rack like a female Moses parting the Red Sea.

"Are you hiding from us?" Val, the mistress, asked with a wry smile. They carried large, expensive purses slung over their shoulders. The bags were so big they looked as if they needed bellboys to carry them. Each woman held an iPhone.

"Carol. Val. Of course not." I grabbed a gown and held it up to me.

"That's a size two." Val said drily, placing a hand on her sharp, bony hip. Val was a size two. Her dark hair was pulled back from her lean, carved face. Physically she appeared to be all edges, but her personality was cautious, even thoughtful.

"It looks like something a drag queen would wear." Carol, the wife, grabbed the dress from me and threw it on a low-slung leather chair. Her hair was a mass of graying curls. She had all the personality and subtlety of a John Deere tractor. Lund was a man of divergent taste in women.

"Why are you avoiding us?" Carol persisted.

"Haven't you ever wanted to be alone?"

"Not in Saks." Val smiled.

"This is déjà vu that we've run into you," Carol said.

"Serendipity," Val corrected her.

"We were going to call you, but we can't get ahold of Lund." Carol shook her iPhone as if to make it ring. "Did you hear that Emma Parker's off the movie?"

"Yes."

"I told Lund she was wrong for the part. Too neurotic. Too New Yorky. But he had a vision." She paused, her lips curved down. "He didn't come home last night, and he wasn't with Val . . ." Her voice quivered then trailed off.

"You were on the short list for the role, Diana," Val continued for her.

They were like a married couple correcting each other and picking up the other's train of thought.

"We need to talk now." Carol had regained her composure.

The two women guided me to a private dressing room and promptly dismissed the saleslady. I sat on a sofa. My tiny Saks bag looked pathetic in this room filled with Charles Chang Lima outfits and Prada suits. My reflection was on display in the three-way mirror. I wore jeans and a crisp white shirt. I felt fleshy and all breasts compared to these two women.

They began to undress. Val had the body of a mistress, toned and exercised. Carol had the body of a wife, thin but sagging.

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"I was trying to reach Lund to set up a meeting for you." Carol stepped into a pair of blue-and-white striped trousers. "He told me he was going to sleep at the office. Why does he lie?" she asked Val.

Val shimmied into a black dress. "He can't help himself. Even when he doesn't need to lie, he lies. Diana, we'll set up a meeting with you and Lund later today. It'll just be perfunctory. There isn't time to interview other actresses, and he knows it."

"Let me get this straight. You're offering me the role of the wife in Lund's movie?"

"Yes," they said in unison.

I had a jolt of pure optimism; the kind that shoots through an actor when she hears the word "yes." It felt as if I'd just downed a Starbucks espresso laced with steroids. I was keenly alert and able to do anything, especially have a career. Then I thought of Lund sauntering out of Emma Parker's bedroom and my optimism ebbed.

"His secretary didn't know where he was," Carol snapped angrily. "For God's sake, the movie is shut down. My ass is on the line." She stared at her ass in the mirror, then zipped Val up. In return Val held up a blue-and-white pinstripe jacket for Carol to slip into.

"Maybe Lund doesn't want me for the role? I did read for him. He didn't seem impressed," I said.

"Lund needs to be pushed into a corner," Val said.

"It's the only way he can make a decision," Carol explained.

"So we're pushing." Val studied her reflection. "A little black dress. Perfect for a funeral. There's always one or two a year at least." Now her gaze was on me. "We always wanted you for the part of the wife. You have that genteel suburban look. All the other actresses we've seen look like they're trying out for *The Real Housewives of Orange County.*"

Val grabbed her iPhone off a chair and answered, "Yes?"

It must've made a noise that only dogs and Val could hear because I hadn't heard anything. She began talking about another movie she was casting.

Carol grabbed her iPhone and punched something, then snapped, "Is he back yet? Get him now."

I sat staring at my little Saks bag feeling doomed and exhilarated at the same time when my cell phone rang. I fumbled around in my purse, finally digging it out and answering it.

"He's gone. Diana, I just want to say again that I'm sorry about forgetting our lunch." It was Emma.

"Listen, don't worry about it. . . . I can't talk right now."

"One more thing. Lund was so sweet when he told me I hadn't worked out for the part. He said let's get a drink. One thing led to another. Somehow I thought if I went to bed with him he'd give me back the role. A sort of reversal of the casting-couch seduction. Screw the director after you lose the part."

"Where the hell have you been, Lund?" Carol snarled into her cell.

"Where are you?" Emma asked me

"I'm on a callback for Herbal Heart. I have to go."

"You know what's really sick? I think I'm falling for him." Emma hung up.

"Four o'clock, Lund." Carol disconnected her phone and looked at me. "The meeting is set."

"Does he know it's me he's seeing?" I asked.

"Of course he does. What's wrong with you, Diana?"

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"I'm not sure."

Val was off her phone now and studying me. "What's Herbal Heart?"

"I've got a callback for a commercial for a premenopausal pill. It's called Herbal Heart."

Carol stepped out of her pinstripe trousers. "I look like a two-bit gangster in this suit." She turned on me. "Did you say premenopausal pill? Hawking anything that has to do with a woman aging is a bad career move for you, Diana. Don't do it."

"Who were you talking to?" Val smiled slyly. "Why did you lie about being on a callback and not here with us?"

"I was talking to somebody who wouldn't understand. . . . I should go on this commercial. You know, just in case." I stood.

"You're going to get this part in Lund's movie, Diana, if I have to stuff you down his throat. So don't bother with that other shit. And don't forget, four o'clock. Lund's office." Carol was now bare-legged, wearing only the gangsterlike pinstripe jacket. She looked like an aged chorus girl searching for a production of *Guys and Dolls.*

You need to have a career in order to make a bad career move. So I did go to the callback for Herbal Heart. I was playing a wife in that one, too. Herbal Heart was going to make me a whole woman again so I could enjoy playing with my Labrador and my husband. The director and client smiled and nodded and said they'd let me know.

At four o'clock I was sitting in Lund Hagan's office.

Like many directors' offices, Lund's had a rented, transitory feeling to it. It was large enough to be impressive, as was his leather chair and glass-and-metal desk. The only personal touches were a couple of posters from his most recent movies and a Best Director Oscar sitting on a dull gray filing cabinet.

Lund's cold eyes took me in. "I see you, Val, and Carol have been very busy. What did you tell them?" He rose from his chair, forcing me to look up at him.

"Nothing."

"You expect me to believe that?" He came around and sat on the edge of his desk and scratched his perfectly unshaven chin. "Let's put our cards on the table, Diana. If I don't hire you, you're going to tell them about Emma and me. Isn't that how it works?"

"No."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"Yes."

"You were on Val's and Carol's short list. Not mine. I never took you for a player, Diana."

By player he meant a conniver and schemer.

"Do you want me for this role or not? I have a long drive back to Malibu."

"You've pushed me into a corner. I have no choice." He put up his hands like a man being held at gunpoint.

I thought of the money I would earn and the prestige this role could bring me. I thought of my rotting wood deck, leaky roof, and my Jag's heater that never turned off. What difference did it make if Lund Hagan thought I was blackmailing him?

"I'll do my best for you, Lund," I heard myself say.

"I'll make you look damn good on film, Diana. But if Carol or Val hear one word about Emma and me, I can make you look just as bad, or reduce your part to nothing in the editing room."

I drove to Malibu with the setting sun in my eyes.

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At one o'clock in the morning the phone rang, pulling me out of a restless sleep.

"How could you do this, Diana!" Emma Parker screamed at me.

"Do what?"

"I looked up to you. You and Colin were the golden couple because you both had principles!"

"Are we talking about the role of the wife?"

"Yes! You are the last person I ever thought would use blackmail to get . . ."

"I'm not blackmailing anyone."

"You threatened to tell Val and Carol if Lund didn't give you the part."

"Did he tell you that? It's not true. I was on the short list. Val and Carol got me a meeting with Lund. It had nothing to do with you and him."

"Really? And how did you get to see Val and Carol?"

I told her what had happened at Saks.

There was a long, heavy pause, then, "You expect me to believe that Carol and Val were sharing a dressing room in Saks and invited you in to give you the role of the wife?"

"Yes."

"When was this?"

"After I left you."

"So you were with them in a dressing room at Saks when I called you?"

"Yes."

"No you weren't. You were on the callback for Herbal Heart. You should get your lies straight, Diana." She slammed the phone down.

On the set four days later, I was pouring coffee into a mug. It was cold, but I blew on it as if it were hot. Sense memory. I listened to Josh Black, the actor, tell me there was nothing wrong with our married life. Beyond the lights voices were raised from the shadowy soundstage. Josh continued his lines but without conviction until Lund yelled, "Cut, God damnit!" Then, confronting two men in suits, he fumed, "I'm shooting a movie here."

The makeup woman rushed onto the set and began dabbing at my face. "Did you hear?" she said in a low voice. "Emma Parker was murdered."

"What?" I slumped against the fake kitchen counter. "I can't believe it."

The set lights dimmed. Now I could see the people on the soundstage clearly. The taller of the two men talking to Lund turned in my direction. I sucked in my breath. It was Detective Leo Heath. His dark hair was cut short and graying at the temples. His dark intelligent eyes turned hard as he took me in. The last time I saw him was in my bed. In my arms. He had left early in the morning. But he had called. He had left messages. I never returned any of them.

The next day, Friday, *Variety* ran a headline: AXED ACTRESS SHOT DEAD. On Saturday I sat on my deck hiding my face from the sun under a battered straw hat. The police had questioned Lund, but when they narrowed down the time of Emma's death he had an alibi. He was with his mistress and his wife. I was waiting to be questioned.

"Do you have an alibi?" Ryan Johns, my next-door neighbor, sprawled on my lounge chair. His house, oozing money and success, towered over mine. He wore Bermuda shorts, a Hawaiian shirt, a gold Piaget watch, and Ugg boots.

"I was here. Alone. I haven't been questioned."

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"You could say you were with me." He belched, then leered at me. He was on his fifth Corona.

"Do you really think I need an alibi?"

His bleary blue eyes took me in. Then he shook his head, causing his red curly hair to bounce like springs. "This is Hollywood, Diana. They're going to need a suspect and quickly. Do you think Lund hasn't told the police you were blackmailing him?"

"But I wasn't. Val and Carol know that."

"Let me be your alibi, Diana. Let me do something for you." He sat up and stared out over the railing.

I lifted my hat and followed his gaze. Detective Leo Heath stood on the beach looking up at us. His hands were in his pant pockets. The breeze bellowed his jacket out and blew his tie over his shoulder. Sunglasses covered his eyes. Then he reached into his pocket and showed his badge, as if I didn't know he was the police. It caught the sun and glimmered. He pointed at the locked gate that led from the beach to the pathway that separated my house from Ryan's. I got up and let him in.

When we were back on the deck, I said, "I have a front door." I sounded cold and aloof and immediately regretted my tone.

"You didn't answer it. Your Jag was in the carport so I came around the long way." He looked at Ryan.

"Who are you?" He slipped off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his pugilistic nose.

"Ryan Johns. I live next-door."

Leo nodded as he stamped his feet trying to knock the sand off his shoes. Then his smile slid sideways. "Nice outfit. You in the biz?"

"Screenwriter."

He turned back to me. "Wasn't your husband a screenwriter?" He knew damn well he was.

"Yes."

He nodded vaguely. "I have some questions I'd like to ask you, Miss Poole."

We went into the living room. I demanded that Ryan stay. I needed a buffer between me and Leo Heath. Ryan and I sat on the sofa. I took off my hat and ran my hand through my hair. Heath stood by the fireplace. Colin's Oscars glimmered from the mantel.

"What is it you would like to ask me?" I said.

"When was the last time you saw Emma Parker?"

I told him about going to her house but paused, remembering Lund coming out of the bedroom.

"Anybody else there?"

I related my encounter with Lund.

He nodded. "Then where did you go?"

I told him about running into Val and Carol at Saks and how they offered me the role of the wife in the dressing room.

"Is that about the time Emma called you? I have her list of calls from her cell phone."

I explained the awkwardness of the phone call.

"So you lied to her."

"It wasn't exactly a lie. How did you know?"

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"Val Franz, the mistress, said you told whoever you were taking to that you were on a Herbal Heart callback."

"What's that?" Ryan asked between gulps of his Corona.

"A natural hormone for early menopause," I snapped.

He gaped at me. "Oh, Diana, that's a bad career move."

"Could we get back to why you lied to Emma Parker?" Leo asked drily.

"I couldn't very well tell her I was with Lund's wife and mistress. I mean she had just gone to bed with him. Nor could I tell her that I was being offered the part that she had just been fired from."

"By the man she had just gone to bed with," he said in a tired voice. Then his dark eyes bored into me. "Why not?"

"Because she was in a delicate state and I didn't have time to explain and I didn't want Val and Carol to know Lund was with Emma."

"Confusing, isn't it?" Ryan observed.

"No. It's stupid."

I felt as if I had to defend Emma. Or was it me? "This from a man with three wives?" I blurted.

Ryan stared at Leo, then at me. Leo ignored the comment by looking at his notes.

"Emma Parker was killed between one and three in the morning on Tuesday. Where were you at that time?"

"She was with me," Ryan announced too quickly, like an actor rushing his cue.

Leo smiled crookedly. "Were you dressed like that when she was with you?"

Ryan slammed his beer onto the table and stood. "She's not saying any more."

"Ryan." I took his hand and pulled him back down to the sofa.

Leo turned to study the statuettes on the mantel. "I see you didn't get rid of Colin's Oscars. Weren't you going to do that?"

"I was trying to let go."

He swung around facing me. "But just for one night."

"What is that supposed to mean?!"

"My God! You went to bed with him." Ryan stared at me accusingly. "I can see it on your face and his. You both look pathetic."

"This coming from a guy wearing Uggs," Leo snorted.

"It was a mistake, Ryan."

"A cop? You went to bed with a cop? You're an actress, an artist. How could you go to bed with a cop? And not me?"

"So were you still with her from one to three o'clock in the morning?" Leo asked.

Before Ryan was forced to answer, I said, "No, he wasn't. I was here in bed. Alone. Who has an alibi for those hours anyway?"

"Some people do."

"Well maybe they need to have one."

"I would just like to say one thing, Diana." Ryan was now at the sliding doors facing us. "When the great screenwriter Herman Mankiewicz drunkenly threw up on the table during a dinner party at Hearst's castle, he turned to his hostess, Marion Davies, and said, 'Don't worry, Marion, the white wine went with the fish.' Think about it." He opened the door and left.

"What does that mean, and why do you have to think about it?" Leo asked.

"Maybe it means you can get away with anything as long as the white wine goes with the fish," I said.

"Is that why you didn't call me back? We don't go together?"

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"You were divorcing your third wife and I'm still mourning my husband. That's not a great combination."

"You may need a lawyer."

"Why?"

"Lund Hagan said you were blackmailing him to get Emma Parker's role. Val Franz and Carol Hagan said all they offered you was a reading with Lund. They said they never told you that you had the part."

"But that's not true."

He shrugged. "If it isn't, you're being set up very nicely."

"You believe me, don't you?"

"Why should I?" His face turned somber, the eyes hooded.

"Because we went to bed."

He cocked his head to one side and studied me. "All I know, Diana, is that I called you ten times and you never returned one call. You're going to have to come down to the Hollywood station tomorrow and give a full statement." He sauntered out of the room to the foyer. I heard the front door open.

"You called twelve times, but who's counting," I yelled after him, and then added, "I was afraid." I heard the door close.

When I went to bed that night I didn't take my sleeping pill. The TV was on. A black-and-white B-movie, starring Bonita Granville and one of those vague male actors who never made it, filled the deadly silence of my room. I thought of Emma looking for her self-worth. How the business and her own conflicted needs had stripped it away from her. But why kill her? She was no threat to Lund or Val or Carol. Carol the wife. I remembered her at Saks fighting back tears and anger at Lund for not coming home. One mistress she could handle. But two? Did Emma upset the balance?

I lay back on my pillows and closed my eyes. I reached over and felt the cold, empty side of the bed. When was I going to stop being afraid to fill this other side? And then I thought of how to find the murderer and call Leo Heath back at the same time. Wrapping my husband's silk paisley robe around me, I went to the kitchen and got my Filofax. I called Carol Hagan. She answered on the fifth ring.

"This is Diana and I know who killed Emma. " Then I hung up and called Val and said the exact same thing.

Then I called Leo on his cell phone. A woman answered.

"Is Leo Heath there?"

"Just a sec."

I waited, and then his sleepy voice came on the line. "Yeah?"

"This is Diana. Who's the woman?"

"Let me take a look. Don't know her name."

I told him what I had done.

"You have a death wish?" he growled.

"No. I just don't want to be framed for murder."

"Jesus Christ. I'm coming over. Wait. Are you calling me back or trying to solve a murder?"

"I'm tying to save myself." I hung up. He has a woman in his bed and he doesn't know her name. What the hell was I doing?

I had left the front door unlocked. And now I sat in the living room in the dark, grasping one of Colin's Oscars. It was the only weapon I could think of other than a knife. I just couldn't see myself plunging a blade into Carol Hagan's Prada-clad

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body. I was coming to the conclusion that maybe I did have a death wish.

Suddenly there was a loud banging on the sliding-glass doors. I dropped to the floor and peered around the sofa. Outside Ryan swayed drunkenly, waving a bottle. I let out a sigh and turned the lamp on and then pulled the door open. Before I could tell him to go home and sleep it off, he pushed past me and collapsed on the sofa.

"How could you, Diana? A cop. A gumshoe, a flatfoot dick."

"He wrote a book," I responded ineptly.

"Was it made into a movie?"

"Yes. But he hasn't written another one. Writer's block. Could we talk about this another time? I'm . . ."

"Jesus, a cop who's a writer. How cliché is that? How cliché is writer's block? How could you do that to Colin? He was a real writer."

"Stop it, Ryan."

"If you were going to give his Oscars away, why didn't you give them to me? You know I've always coveted them. Been jealous of them. You know I feel like a meaningless hack compared to him. Successful but meaningless."

"He's dead, Ryan. Go home."

He took a hit of tequila from a bottle with a portrait of Frida Kahlo on the label. Ryan was always looking for the artist outside himself.

He blinked his eyes at me trying to bring me into focus. "Why are you holding that Oscar by its head?"

"I'm solving a murder. And you're in the way."

His lids drooped. "I always wanted an Oscar and you." The bottle fell from his hand as he passed out.

I shook him. He moaned and slapped me away

The doorbell rang. I froze. Then I turned the lamp off and squeezed onto the sofa next to Ryan.

"Jesus Christ, it's dark in here." It was Carol Hagan's voice. So it was the wife.

"Diana?" Val's voice. It was the mistress. Did they do everything together, including murder? I hadn't thought of that. I turned the light on. They stood in the room, blinking and staring at me.

"What's Ryan Johns doing here?" Val asked.

"He stumbled in and passed out."

"I don't know how anybody can be so successful and such a failure at the same time," Carol remarked.

"Does his presence make things a little awkward?" I asked

"We just want to talk," Carol said.

"We don't want to talk, Carol," Val corrected in an exasperated tone. "We're not taking a meeting. We're not doing lunch. I told you not to come with me."

"I had to. After what you did for me." Tears of gratitude ran down her cheeks.

"What did you do for her, Val?" I asked.

"I thought you knew. I killed Emma."

"Actually, I thought Carol did it."

"She's a killer, but only in business." She pulled a gun from the jacket of her Charles Chang Lima suit.

"The police are on their way," I said.

"I doubt that. Why would they come rushing out in the middle of the night on an actress's whim?"

"How could you kill Emma? She didn't mean anything to Lund," I said.

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"Yes, she did." Carol dabbed at her tears with a Hermès scarf.

"But Lund wasn't going to leave you for Emma."

"If he left anybody, it would've been Val. I couldn't have that."

"She was breaking up our family," Val said.

"Family?" I repeated the word as if none of us knew the meaning of it. Maybe we didn't.

"That's how I think of us." Val smiled at Carol.

"I could never be friends with Emma," Carol sniffed. "Not the way I am with Val. She's like the sister I never had."

"There are all kinds of families. We create them however we can. But that's what we *are*." Val spoke philosophically.

Unexpectedly Ryan Johns rose to his feet, belching and singing the Sly Stone song, "We Are Family." Startled, Val shot at him. He lurched forward and threw up all over her.

Screaming and recoiling, Val dropped the gun. I grabbed it. There was a loud banging, then the sound of the front door being slammed back against the foyer wall.

Leo Heath ran into the room with his gun drawn. Val fell to her knees. Carol tried to wipe the puke off her with her scarf.

Ryan slumped back onto the sofa. "I've been shot."

"She missed you." I stared at the shattered mirror on the wall.

"What the hell happened?" Leo wrinkled his nose at Val.

"The tequila went with the gun," I said.

Three hours later Ryan was back in his house, tucked into his bed. Val and Carol were arrested. I was in my kitchen holding a hot cup of coffee.

Hands in his pockets, Leo leaned in the doorway. "I have to get back to the station."

"I want to say something before you leave. I've been thinking about self-worth. Emma's, Val's, Ryan's, and mine. My self-worth isn't so low that I want a man who can't remember the name of the woman he's in bed with."

"She was my sister."

"You were in bed with your sister?"

He grinned. "No, she's staying with me until her house is finished being painted. She happened to answer my cell."

"Oh."

He studied his shoes for a moment, then he studied me. "So were you calling me back?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Two days later my agent informed me that the movie had been canceled. Then the Herbal Heart people called and said I'd gotten the part, but because of the publicity surrounding Emma Parker's death, the arrests of Val Franz and Carol Hagan, and my involvement in it all, they decided to go with a "lesser known" actress.

I went out and stood on my dilapidated balcony. It took me a moment to realize that the beach was swarming with paparazzi. Their cameras were aimed up at me like the guns of snipers.

"Smile, Diana," they demanded.

I went back inside. ●

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MANILA BURNING

by Clark Howard

Daniel Cargo sat on the back of a flatbed truck as it rumbled and rattled along a grossly rutted dirt road on its way from the outback of the Palayan Penal Farm to the farm's main administration building. The truck, which was a decade or more old, was painted bright yellow. Across its two side-cabin doors was lettered, in red: PHILIPPINE NATIONAL PRISONS. There were four other men on the flatbed with Daniel Cargo, all of them dressed in loose prison garb identical in yellow color to the truck.

When the vehicle reached the administration building, it parked at a rear dock and a corrections officer motioned the men off. The guard was unarmed and the five men were not cuffed or shackled. There was no need for security since the prisoners were not escape risks; they were being released from prison that day.

Clark Howard is one of this magazine's all-time favorite contributors, with five Readers Awards to his credit and numerous Readers Award scrolls. His 150-plus published short stories, and some two dozen novels and true-crime books, also make him one of the more prolific of our authors. He is an Edgar Allan Poe Award Best Short Story winner who has seven additional Edgar nominations to his credit. He rejoins us this month with an exciting adventure/thriller.

Once inside the building, the men sat in a line on a wooden bench outside an office on the door of which was painted: DISCHARGES. One by one, the men were summoned into the office. When it was Daniel Cargo's turn, he stood in front of a desk at which sat a Filipino prison department official dressed in a spotless white uniform, shiny black hair slicked back, thin moustache perfectly trimmed, with a fragrance of cologne emanating from him. When he spoke, his words were practiced and precise.

"Inmate Daniel James Cargo, number 1172307, having successfully completed your one-year sentence for illegally trading in fossil stone without a license, you are hereby discharged from the Philippine National Prison System. Since you are a foreigner, I am returning herewith your passport, which was issued by the government of the United States of America. Sign this form to acknowledge receipt of the passport."

Cargo leaned over the desk and signed the form.

"In addition," the official continued, "you are being given the legally prescribed prisoner discharge money in the sum of two thousand three hundred Filipino pesos. Sign here to acknowledge receipt of this money."

Hardly worth signing for, Cargo thought as he signed a second form.

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Twenty-three hundred Filipino pesos was less than fifty U.S. dollars.

"It is also my duty," the officer concluded, "to advise you that as a convicted felon without Philippine citizenship, you are no longer welcome in this country. Therefore, your passport has been stamped with a seven-day visa, requiring you to leave within that period. That visa must be validated at an airport or seaport point of exit within that period or a warrant will be issued for your arrest, and you will be required to serve an additional one year in custody." The official nodded curtly. "Dismissed."

Money and passport in hand, Cargo joined the other four men as they were led to a clothing-issue room where they exchanged their yellow prison garb for identical white shirts and trousers. They were allowed to keep their flip-flop sandals, which were of hard black rubber made from recycled truck tires. Afterward, they were herded into a yellow prison van to be driven into Manila.

It was a two-hour drive south to Manila, and because the city was situated at sea level and the prison camp had been about one thousand feet higher, Cargo could look down and see their destination when they were still half an hour away. From the road above, Manila looked like a pristine crescent of white block buildings surrounded by greenery on the eastern edge of Manila Bay, connected to a series of bridges leading across the Pasig River, which flowed around it, all of it backdropped by the South China Sea and its constant water traffic. On the page of a four-color travel brochure, it could be described as scenic, picturesque, resplendent. But that was only from the road above.

As the prison van descended and left the deceptions of altitude behind, the real Manila began to emerge. The first sign that the city was imminent was the landmark familiar to all of them: an infamous disgrace known as Smoky Mountain. A huge tower of garbage, infested with rats and maggots, the enormous dump derived its name from a gray-green methane mist that hovered over it. As the van neared the dump, what might have been mistaken for animals swarming all over it became, on closer observation, young children, adolescents, old people—all of them scavenging over the enormous mass of garbage steaming and stinking in the moist tropical heat.

"Roll up the windows," the driver of the van ordered. "I don't want that stench in here when I drive back."

The five passengers obeyed at once; they did not want to smell Smoky Mountain either. But they could not make themselves look away; it was like witnessing a car accident, or a building on fire, or a homeless person dying in the gutter. The scene was ugly, but its observation somehow imperative, mesmerizing.

When the van reached the Manila City Jail parking lot, the driver cut the engine and rose from behind the wheel. "Okay, you're free to go," he said.

Incongruously, the Manila City Jail was not situated in some remote, outlying area; it was squarely in the midst of central Manila, surrounded by shopping malls, lines of small stores, bus stops, commercial buildings, and all other manner of bustling city life. The five released men exited the van directly into society and went their separate ways.

As Daniel Cargo walked off the parking lot, he was immediately approached by a smiling street girl in hot pants and a skimpy top. "Hey, goo'lookin', how long you no have girl, huh? Me treat you super fine."

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"No money," Cargo said, without stopping.

"Bullshit!" she snapped, her smile fading to a glower. "I know you get two thousand pesos discharge money! You think I stupid? You lie, son of bitch!"

Someone else fell in beside him, prettier than the first. "Hey, guy, you like it jail kind? I give you jail kind pretty good." One glance and Cargo knew it was a ladyboy: a male made up to look like a street girl.

As Cargo stepped around him, a boy who looked like a boy joined him. "You want some *shabu,* man? Good stuff. Cheap." Cargo shook his head. *Shabu* was Filipino methamphetamine. What Cargo could have used at the moment was a bottle of gin and a bucket of ice.

To get away from the jailhouse street hustlers, Cargo cut his way against traffic across the busy street, and on the other side melded into the pedestrian flow. As he walked, Cargo thought about Carli. Carlotta Gomez, a nurse at St. Luke's Hospital in nearby Quezon City. Cargo had met her while being treated in the hospital's emergency room for a broken thumb. He told the hospital admissions clerk that the injury occurred while helping a friend move a heavy bookcase. Actually it had happened when he and another man were loading slabs of fossil stone onto the back of a pickup. The two men had bought the fossil stone on the black market to sell at a profit to a freighter captain on the docks, who would then transport it to Hawaii to be used as tabletops for very expensive furniture. The activity was illegal, since fossil stone could only be found on the Philippine island of Mindanao, and its mining, processing, and distribution was strictly controlled by the Philippine government.

When Daniel Cargo and Carlotta Gomez met in the hospital emergency room, there was an immediate attraction between them. Carlotta was one of those subtly sultry young Filipina women with flawless caramel skin, naturally florid lips that never required cosmetic enhancement, and eyes dark as a raven's. Cargo, who was nothing if not direct, had asked what time her shift ended. And Carlotta, just as directly, had replied midnight. When they met outside the hospital that night, they kissed as if it was the most natural thing in the world to do, as if they had known each other and been kissing for a lifetime.

Cargo and Carlotta lived together for eighteen months. Then one night the Philippine National Police ambushed a pickup truck loaded with fossil stone just outside Rutulo. The driver, Danny Cargo, was caught. The other man escaped in the darkness. A month later, Danny Cargo was sentenced to prison for a year.

Down a little alleyway off Roxas Boulevard, Cargo found a secondhand clothing store and went in to buy a pair of worn khakis and a cheap black pullover shirt. Those, and a pair of decent cloth deck shoes, cost him four hundred eighty of the twenty-three hundred pesos he had, but it was worth it to Danny Cargo. He did not want to go see Carlotta wearing prison-issue release clothes, which he left for the merchant to sell to someone else.

Back on the boulevard, Cargo boarded the first bus with a destination sign for Quezon City. When he tried to pay his fare, the bus driver stopped him for more money. The fare had increased. The driver looked at him as if he might be trying to cheat the bus company.

In Quezon City an hour later, Cargo got off at Rodriguez Avenue and walked several blocks to St. Luke's Hospital. At the information desk, he inquired whether Carlotta Gomez was on the day shift. A young volunteer intern checked

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her computer, frowned, and said, "She no longer works here, sir."

Cargo went to the personnel office. A clerk there said, "Miss Gomez left our employ six months ago. I believe she took a job at Makati Medical Center up in Manila."

Back on another bus, now knowing what fare to pay, Cargo returned to Manila. Not being a Philippine citizen, while in prison he had no civil rights, no visiting privileges, and could not send or receive mail. Still, it had not once occurred to him that he might lose track of Carlotta. For some reason, wishful thinking perhaps, he had simply assumed that when he was released, Carlotta would be right where he had left her. Now that he had learned to the contrary, he began to worry about not being able to find her.

The bus driver gave him directions to Armosola Street, where he found the Makati Medical Center. There, he received similar news.

"Carlotta Gomez left our employ three months ago. She was only with us a short time. Someone said that she went to work for a free health clinic somewhere."

As he was being told this, another clerk came up. "Are you a friend of Carli's?"

"Yes. I used to work with her down at St. Luke's in Quezon City," Cargo lied easily. "I just got back from an overseas job in Borneo and wanted to say hello."

The clerk who had asked the question studied Cargo for a thoughtful moment, then said, "I think you'll find her at the Mary Magdalene Orphanage Clinic over in the Tondo district. It's near Smoky Mountain."

"Thanks. Which bus line goes there, do you know?"

"None. The government stopped bus service to Tondo. Too much trouble over there: robbery, drugs, prostitutes, everything bad. You'll have to use a jeepney to get there."

Thanking her again, Cargo went outside to look for a jeepney. Cheap, unauthorized public transportation, the jeepney was a contraption built from used Isuzu engines, reconditioned Toyota transmissions, and retreaded tires, attached to a metal-pipe frame with a stretched metal-plate floor that had two facing wooden benches bolted to it. Passengers got on and off at will, usually for a fare of three pesos, about seven cents in U.S. money.

Cargo flagged down five jeepneys before agreeing to pay ten pesos to a pockmarked teenage driver willing to make a run to Tondo. The trip, through increasing late afternoon traffic, took more than an hour, with a dozen riders getting on and off along the way. The closer the jeepney got to the Tondo district, the more poverty Cargo saw. Shanty towns began to crop up here and there until, eventually, there was nothing else: only thrown-together shacks or cardboard hovels, people living under bridges, along abandoned railroad embankments, in makeshift family camps among burned-out buildings. The sewage system was a ditch that was a median down the center of the street.

And in the middle of it all: Smoky Mountain, its greenish-gray haze rising up and wafting out to hover over the destitution like lingering death.

Cargo began to feel slightly nauseated. Part of it was because of the stench starting to reach the jeepney from Smoky Mountain, part because since early that morning he had been riding, riding, riding, and he had eaten nothing except the rice, black beans, and moldy bread fed to the prisoners in the penal camp at daybreak before they went into the bean fields to work. Several times he thought about getting something to eat at one of the dozens of kiosks along the way, whenever the jeepney was stuck in traffic, but he knew the driver would

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leave him if he did not get back on in time, and he did not want to try looking for another one. If Carlotta was working a day shift, he might miss her. And he wanted desperately to see her.

The Mary Magdalene Orphanage was in a very old white brick building in a cul-de-sac down a side street. Only three stories tall, it nevertheless seemed to soar over the landlocked impoverishment that surrounded it. A single-story wing jutted out from one side of the building like a skillet handle, ending in double doors over which a large red cross was painted. Inside that wing, Cargo found a medical receiving room filled to capacity with young mothers and children waiting to be seen by a doctor or nurse. All of the children, he noted dismally, had cleft palates or harelips.

At a sign-in desk, Cargo said to a very young woman wearing a white summer nun's habit, "Excuse me, Sister, is Carlotta Gomez on shift, do you know?"

"Gee, no, you just missed her," she smiled up at him. "But you can probably catch her down the street at Rose's. It's a bar where a lot of staff hang out."

Slightly taken aback by her candor, he said, "Ah, okay, Sister, thank you."

The young woman blushed slightly. "I'm not really a sister yet. Just a novitiate."

"Oh." Cargo hesitated, not knowing what else to say. Finally he managed, "Well, good luck. And thanks anyway." Quickly, he left.

He found Rose's Bar and Grill in a surprisingly well-preserved storefront building between an open vegetable market and a bicycle repair shop. Inside, the bar was semi-cooled by four ceiling fans that circulated over half a dozen small tables on one side, a bar and bar stools on the other, and an unwalled, open kitchen in the rear. Cargo saw Carlotta at once, sitting at the bar with another woman. He went over to them. Carlotta was raising her glass to drink when he said, "Hello, Carli."

Unnerved at seeing him, she spilled a little of the drink on her hand. "Danny—my god—"

"Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you—"

"No, no, it's all right," she said, taking a paper napkin handed to her by the woman sitting with her. "It's just such a surprise—my God—when did you, ah—"

"This morning." He smiled at her. "You're a hard lady to find these days."

Carlotta laughed, a little nervously. "I have moved around a bit in the last year. Oh, Danny, this is my friend, Angie O'Brien. She runs the clinic pharmacy. Angie, Danny Cargo. I've told you about him."

Cargo shook hands with a slim, red-haired Anglo woman in khaki slacks and blouse that looked almost military next to Carli's light blue scrubs. After they exchanged greetings, Angie immediately finished her drink and slid off the barstool.

"If it's been a year, you two must have a lot of catching up to do, so I'll run along—"

"Oh, Angie, no, you don't have to leave—"

"I've got some things to do anyway. I'll call you later. Nice to meet you, Danny."

Cargo took Angie's seat at the bar. He and Carlotta awkwardly got through a long moment of silence.

"You look good, Carli," he finally said.

"You don't," Carli replied. "You look—I don't know, Danny—*tired.* Almost gaunt."

He shrugged. "A year in the bean fields up in Palayan will do that." He took a sip of her drink. Carli held up two fingers for the bartender to bring two fresh ones. "I missed you, Carli," he said, his voice catching a little. "I missed you a lot."

Reaching out, she put a hand on his. "I tried to visit you, to write you, but—"

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"I know. I was a foreign prisoner: no privileges." He covered her hand with his. "I thought about you every day, every night—"

"Danny, before you say anything else, I have to tell you something." She glanced down. "I'm with someone else now."

"Oh." He forced a spiritless smile. Swallowing, he cleared his throat. "Sorry, I, ah—wasn't prepared for that."

Their drinks were served and their hands parted.

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Danny."

"No, no, it's okay," he was quick to assure her. Now he managed a more sincere smile. "I don't know why I'm even surprised. Great-looking gal like you can't be expected to stay unattached too long. You, uh—you happy?"

"Very."

Cargo raised his glass. "I'm glad for you, Carli. Cheers."

They toasted.

"Do you have any plans?" she asked.

"Most of my plans," he told her, laughing softly, "involved you. I've got a week to get out of the Philippines or go back to jail for another year. I was hoping to hide out with you until I could get something going and maybe bribe somebody to get the exit visa lifted. I guess my best bet now is to find a way to get out. Trouble is, I've only got about fifty bucks U.S." Embarrassed, he looked away before asking, "How would you feel about lending an ex-boyfriend some money?"

"I'd do it in a heartbeat, Danny—if I had any to lend."

"But you're still working as a nurse, aren't you? Making good money?"

She shook her head. "The place I work now is a charity clinic, Danny. I get room, board, uniforms, and forty-five U.S. dollars a week. I haven't got a cent in the bank."

Cargo shook his head in dismay. "I don't understand, Carli. How'd you end up in a job like that?"

"I didn't exactly 'end up' here," she replied, her tone stiffening a little. "I made a conscious decision to come to Mary Magdalene." Carli took a sip of her drink. "Let me tell you a story. When I was at Makati Medical Center, a little girl, probably not even a week old, was left in a dumpster behind the hospital kitchen. A cook found her. She had a cleft palate, so severe that it was almost impossible to feed her; we had to use an eye dropper and it took two hours. The clinic had no facilities to keep her, so they called the offices of several social services. Every place they called referred them to someplace else. No one wanted to accept the responsibility of taking care of a baby girl with a grotesquely deformed face. Finally the clinic's Catholic chaplain called the Mother Superior of Mary Magdalene Orphanage. She told him to send the child to her. I was the nurse selected to take the baby there. The center provided an ambulance. What I saw when I got there—"

Carli's voice broke. Pausing, she took another swallow of her drink. Exhaling deeply, she then continued.

"What I saw when I got there was an orphanage full of children of all ages, from toddlers to teenagers, all with harelips and cleft palates of one sort or another. Some had already undergone surgery and were in the healing stage; others were waiting their turn. There is a cadre of corrective surgeons all over the Pacific Rim who volunteer their services and come to Manila to operate on children like these. It's a fairly simple procedure, actually; most operations take only thirty or forty minutes.

"While I was there delivering the baby, the Mother Superior asked if I knew of

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any nurses who might, or if I myself might, consider volunteering a few hours a week in the orphanage's clinic. I told her I would ask around. That night I was unable to sleep at all. I kept seeing images of children with horribly deformed mouths, lips, and noses. I was haunted by those images. The next day I left my well-paying job at the clinic and went to work full time at Mary Magdalene. I've been here ever since. And I intend to stay here."

Carli fell silent and neither she nor Cargo spoke for what seemed like a long time. Each of them sipped from their glasses. They exchanged constrained glances.

"I suppose you think I'm a fool," Carli said at last. "Giving up a well-paying job and a far more comfortable life—"

"I don't think that at all," Cargo interrupted. Now it was he who touched her hand. "As a matter of fact, I'm proud of you, Carli."

"Really, Danny?" Her dark eyes glistened.

"Really."

"Even though it means I can't help you with any money?"

"Hell, don't worry about that, honey," he said dismissively. "You know me. I'll come up with something." Patting her hand, he withdrew his own, already beginning to worry about what his next step would be.

"Do you have a place to stay tonight?" she asked.

"Not yet," Cargo shook his head.

"Well, there's a cheap little hotel just outside the cul-de-sac called The Rittz, with a double-t. It's owned by a German national named Manfred Haas; everybody calls him Freddy. It's a dump, hardly anyone ever stays there; rumors are that it's just a front for something, stolen goods, pearl-smuggling, who knows what. Anyway, when the beds in our clinic are full, he lets the Mother Superior put patients in his hotel rooms on a temporary basis—always with a couple of nuns to stay overnight as chaperones—"

"Isn't that kind of odd?" Cargo asked. "An arrangement like that between a Mother Superior and the type of guy you say this Haas is?"

"Perhaps it is kind of odd," Carli acknowledged, her tone once again tightening, "but we're all dedicated to the orphanage and the clinic and what we're doing for these unfortunate children, so sometimes we make our own rules."

"Hey, Carli, I understand," Cargo said quickly. "I wasn't being critical—not with my background."

"Okay," she said, more softly. "What I was getting at is that I can probably persuade Freddy to let you bunk at his place for a couple of nights, if you want me to."

"Sure, great. Listen, thanks—" He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the cheek. He was already wondering if this Haas could put him on to something so that he could manage to stay in Manila.

And maybe get Carli back again.

A little while later, Carli walked him out of Rose's Bar and around a corner to the Rittz Hotel, a shabby, ramshackle, two-story wooden building in front of which two teenage meth addicts were leaning shoulder to shoulder staring into space. Inside, at a scarred roll-top desk, wearing shorts and a sweaty undershirt, was a squat, muscular, completely bald man whom Carlotta introduced as Freddy Haas. There was a suspicious cheerfulness about him, and it irritated Cargo that he hugged Carli with such familiarity.

"Sure, sure, of course, Carli, anything for you," he agreed at once when Carli

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asked about a room for Cargo, and he shook Cargo's hand with a powerful grip. "Happy to help your friend out, my pleasure."

As Carli thanked him and took her leave, Cargo noticed that the bulldog German's eyes swept over her lush young body until she was all the way out the door.

"So," he then asked Cargo, "how close were you to Carli?"

"Just good friends," Cargo lied.

"Ever get her in bed?"

Cargo kept his growing irritation in check and shook his head. "Like I said, just friends."

"I've been trying to get her in bed ever since she came to work at the clinic," he said candidly, "but no luck. Yet, anyway."

"I got the impression she was involved with someone," Cargo said, trying to sound casual.

"What the hell difference does that make?" Haas growled. "I don't want to marry her, I just want to screw her." Opening a drawer in the roll-top, he took out a key. "Come on, I'll show you your room."

Awhile later, ravenous by then, Cargo left the hotel and walked around until he found a reasonably clean cafe and had a double order of *adabo* and *sinigang*, which he washed down with four bottles of San Miguel, the Filipino national beer. The *adabo*, which was shredded pork stewed in soy sauce and peppercorns, and the *sinigang*, soup made from guava, tamarind, and tomatoes, then poured over steamed rice, tasted like a feast to Cargo, who in the penal camp had subsisted for a year on beans and plain steamed rice, with an occasional hunk of undercooked chicken or pork.

Walking back to the Rittz, he began to feel the results of the earlier drink with Carli, now boosted by the four bottles of beer. Several young Filipino street hoodlums took note of his slightly faltering gait with more than passing interest, but he managed to make it back to the hotel unmolested.

Freddy Haas was nowhere to be seen when Cargo got there, which was a relief. He instinctively disliked the German and wanted to have as little to do with him as possible, so he hurried directly upstairs.

Once in the room, Cargo undressed and laid down on the lumpy cot mattress in his underwear. There was a single light bulb dangling from the ceiling, but he did not bother to turn it on. One small window, with no shade or shutters, he left open in case a rogue breeze happened to penetrate the steamy night heat. But nothing came in except the mixed noises of the slum around him: a baby crying, a woman screaming angrily at someone, laughter now and again about God knew what, music from ghetto blasters, people's names being called out, children screeching in the streets—all of it blended into a raw symphony of people trying to get through the night, and probably dreading the day to come.

Closing his eyes, Danny Cargo thought about all the nights he had gone to sleep on his straw mat at the penal farm. That had been the only pleasant part of the endless days, resting in the coolness of that higher altitude, listening to the soothing sounds of night herons.

Odd, he thought as he began to drift off into an alcoholic buzz of sleep, that he should miss anything at all about the penal farm . . .

Early the next morning, Cargo was awakened by someone gently shaking his

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shoulder. Opening his eyes, he saw that Carli, in a fresh nurse's uniform, was sitting on the side of his bed holding a container of steaming coffee for him.

"My God, Danny, you're covered with mosquito bites!" she scolded him. "Why didn't you close the window?"

"I guess I didn't think to," he said sleepily. "We didn't have mosquitos up at Palayan. Too high." He accepted the coffee. "I didn't expect room service in this trap," he quipped. Carli was not amused; her pretty face was fixed in a serious expression.

"Listen, I want you to get up and come with me. I think I may have found a way for you to get enough money to get out of the country before your visa expires."

"How?" he asked, coming wide awake with interest.

"Get out of bed, wash up, and come with me. Then you'll find out."

At a grimy, brown-stained sink in one corner of the room, Cargo washed as best he could without the benefit of soap, slicked his hair back wet, and dried off with his undershirt, which he left on the bed. Getting into his shirt and trousers, he was conscious of Carli scrutinizing his haggard body and, embarrassed, turned away as he dressed.

Managing to burn his mouth with several sips of the coffee she had brought him, he also began to perspire with the first muggy heat of the day, which made his mosquito bites begin to itch.

"Don't scratch those!" Carli snapped. "When's the last time you had a malaria shot?"

"Hell, Carli, I don't know!" he snapped back, beginning to get irritated now. "Two, three years, I guess."

"We'll stop at the clinic on our way," she decided.

"On our way where?"

"You'll see. Come on, hurry."

It was a short walk to the clinic, but on the way they saw scores of people—old, young, feeble, addicted, desperate—hurrying along the street toward Smoky Mountain to be there when the overnight garbage trucks arrived to dump new loads onto the massive pile that had already begun to emit its methane haze as the tropical sun heated it up. Neither Carli nor Danny Cargo said anything about it. There was nothing *to* say.

At the clinic, Carli gave him a malaria shot and handed him two pills.

"Chloroquine and Fonsidar," she said. "Drink this full glass of water with them."

"Yes, nurse."

She also gave him a small bottle of oily liquid. "Carry this with you. It's tea-tree oil for the itching. And *don't* scratch those bites."

"Yes, nurse," he repeated.

From the clinic, Carli led him to Rose's Bar. "We're meeting Angie, my friend that you met yesterday."

"The pharmacist."

"Yes."

At Rose's, they went directly through the bar, which even that early had several customers, and past the open kitchen to a small office in the rear. Angie O'Brien was there, sitting at a rusting metal desk. Exchanging greetings, she explained to Cargo, "Rose, the owner, is letting us borrow her office." When Carli and Cargo were seated in front of her, she said to him, "Obviously you're wondering what this is all about."

"Obviously," Cargo agreed.

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"As Carli told you yesterday, I run the pharmacy at the orphanage clinic. And as I'm sure you are able to guess by now, the clinic, as well as the orphanage, is being run on severely limited resources. That's why people work there for practically nothing. And that's why the Mother Superior has arrangements with people like Freddy Haas, as Carli also told you, to obtain extra bed space. She has arrangements with others also, to obtain everything from food to cleaning supplies to clothes for the children. A regular group of very proficient thieves sell to us every day at extremely reasonable prices. We wouldn't be able to exist without them."

"But what about the church?" Cargo asked. "It's a Catholic orphanage, isn't it? Don't you receive funds from the church?"

"A limited amount," said Angie. "The problem is that we have expanded far beyond our original charter, because of an ever-increasing number of patients. You see, Danny, the Philippines, even though one of the smallest countries in the world, has now risen to fifth in the world in the number of cleft-palate births. And that is due to one simple reason: the lack of folic acid. Do you know what that is?"

Cargo shook his head. "No."

"It's a B vitamin, usually derived from a healthy diet of fresh fruits, vegetables, and enriched cereal and grain products. Even a quick look around the Tondo district will tell you that healthy diets of such foods are the exception, not the rule." Angie leaned forward and clasped her hands together on an unrusted space on the desktop. "Folic acid, Danny, significantly reduces the incidence of cleft-palate deformity in unborn children. What we desperately need in our medical operation here is a huge supply of folic-acid supplement pills that we can distribute to every woman who becomes pregnant. But we haven't the funds to purchase those supplements in such quantity." She fixed Danny Cargo in an unblinking stare. "That's why we decided to meet with you. We want your help."

Cargo spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I don't understand. How can I possibly be of any help?"

Angie held him in her stare. "By hijacking a truck full of pharmaceutical supplies."

"By *what*—?" Cargo's mouth dropped open. "You want me to *hijack* a truck for you?"

"Yes. We have an informant on the docks who has told us when the next major shipment of pharmaceutical drugs arrives for the wholesale distributor in Manila. That shipment will be picked up by one of the distributor's trucks and taken to a warehouse where orders for various drugs are filled for pharmacies all over the city. We want the truck commandeered before it reaches the warehouse."

Cargo looked from Angie to Carli and back again, several times. "I don't believe this," he said incredulously. "You're talking about committing a serious crime, a major felony—"

Carli reached over and put a hand on his arm. "No, Danny, we're talking about preventing dozens, hundreds, perhaps even *thousands* of babies from being born with awful facial deformities."

"Okay, I understand that. I understand your purpose. But hijacking a truck loaded with drugs isn't like buying food and clothes from petty thieves. Hell, I wouldn't even begin to know how to go about it—"

"The plan is already in place," Angie assured him. Rising, she came around the desk and knelt in front of him. "We have someone who has worked everything out. We know the exact place where the truck can be taken; we even know who

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the driver will be. We just need one more person to put the plan into effect." Angie touched his knees as if she were praying. "We need you, Danny. The unborn children need you."

For the first time, Cargo closely studied Angie O'Brien. Her eyes were tawny, her red hair cut short in a helter-skelter way as if she had done it herself with dull scissors. Her lips, compared to the lushness of Carli's, had to be called thin, and curved down slightly at their corners. Overall, there was a certain something about her—a bearing, a presence, a quality—that, with the nearness of her, seemed to take Danny into its grip and hold him.

"Please, Danny," she pleaded, "just talk to the other person and have everything explained to you. You'll see how simple the whole plan is."

Cargo could not force his eyes away from her. He felt spellbound.

"All right," he said.

Angie rose and opened the office door. "Come in," she said.

Cargo looked around as someone entered. It was Manfred Haas.

Angie sat back down and Haas hung a leg over the corner of the desk nearest to Cargo.

"So," he said, "you know what we are planning. Let me advise you that if you decide not to participate, and you repeat anything you hear in this room, perhaps to get that visa of yours lifted, it will be most unhealthy for you." Haas raised one side of a tropical flowered shirt he wore outside his trousers to show Cargo an automatic pistol stuck in his belt. "Most unhealthy," he repeated. "Do you take my meaning?"

"Yes."

"Good!" Haas smiled an artificially cheerful smile. "Now, here is the plan. I have already reconnoitered everything. The drug shipment arrives the day after tomorrow on the freighter *Vancouver* from Canada. The drugs will be off-loaded onto Pier 19 where longshoremen will then pack them into a large transport truck. The driver will be a Chinese named Heng, who is a longtime employee of DuPree Wholesale Drugs. He is grossly fat and lazy, and has been making this run for so long he could probably do it with his eyes closed.

"Now then, the DuPree warehouse is north of the city in the Malolos district. From the docks, Heng drives directly to Independence Boulevard and travels north to Kasibu Street, where he makes a right turn toward an on-ramp of Highway 1, which is four blocks away. Between Independence Boulevard and the on-ramp is Matalon Street, which has a stop sign. When Heng stops at the intersection of Kasibu and Matalon, we take him. This is a quiet residential area where it is highly unlikely that we will be observed. I will approach on the passenger side with this—" Haas patted the pistol in his belt—"and order him to move over toward me. You get in on the driver's side and—" Haas suddenly frowned. "You do know how to drive, don't you?"

"Yes."

"We assumed so. Carli told us about your previous fossil-stone business. But I had to make sure. Anyway, we drive away with Heng between us. But instead of going north on Highway 1, we go south, toward Quezon City. We leave the highway at Manolo Avenue and drive to the E-Z Storage facility where I have rented a storage unit under an assumed name. We take Heng's cell phone away, tie him up, gag him, and leave him in the rented unit." Haas glanced at Carli, then Angie, with an ingratiating smile. "Later, of course, we'll telephone his employer

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and tell him where the driver is; we want no one hurt in this operation." Then, back to Cargo: "We drive the truck to a small warehouse I own back here in Tondo. There we sort out the various boxes of drugs—"

"What kind of drugs are we talking about?" Cargo asked bluntly. "I don't want to take a chance of being executed for moving street drugs."

Angie O'Brien shook her head. "No need to worry about that. These are pharmaceuticals only, drugs that physicians prescribe: for allergies, high blood pressure, diabetes, asthma, glaucoma—that sort of thing. And, of course, folic acid. But no drugs that are on the illegal controlled substances list." She nodded to Haas. "Go on, Freddy."

"Sure. Once in my warehouse, we will separate out all the cartons of folic acid, and leave them there for later transfer to the orphanage clinic. The rest of the shipment we will drive to another warehouse where we will meet an associate of mine. He will buy the load from us, truck and all, for twenty-five percent of the value stated on the import bill of lading, minus the folic-acid amount. In turn, he will negotiate with DuPree to sell the shipment back to him, minus the folic acid, for fifty percent of the value." Haas paused to smile broadly. "The beauty of this is that *everybody* profits. The clinic gets its folic acid, you and I, my new friend, get our money, the middleman gets his, and even DuPree comes out ahead because he gets most of his drug shipment *and* a payoff from the insurance company that does not know the shipment has been returned. The plan is wonderful. Happiness will prevail for all!"

Cargo did not like the practiced smile that Freddy Haas flashed, and it rankled him that Haas had referred to Danny as his "new friend." But in his mind, Cargo had to admit to a certain genius in the plan. No violence. No one would get hurt. Everyone would get something out of it. And there seemed no way of anything going wrong. Could be, he decided, this would be his way either out of the country or being able to bribe away that exit visa.

And now, looking more closely at Angie O'Brien, imagining he could still feel the warmth of her hands on his knees, he found his interest in her growing. Next to Carli, she was no raving beauty, of course, but there was still that *something* about her—

"If I decide to come in," he said to Haas, "what's the split?"

"Seventy-thirty," said Haas. "I take an extra twenty percent for the planning and arranging the buyer."

"How much do you estimate the take will be?"

Shrugging, Haas deferred to Angie, who held her hands out palms up in uncertainty.

"There can be no promises made, of course. A lot will depend on the types of drugs in the shipment, and the quantity of each. But if I had to set a figure, strictly on speculation, but based on knowing which drugs are most popular in local hospitals and pharmacies, I would say—" she paused a beat, taking a deep breath—"ten million Philippine pesos."

Pursing his lips in thought, Cargo tried to quickly work the exchange figures in his head, but Freddy Haas was too fast for him. "Danny, my new friend, it comes to a little over two hundred thousand U.S., which means our share would be approximately fifty thousand. You can figure your end at about sixteen."

Danny made a quick decision. "I don't want a seventy-thirty split. Or any split. I want a flat guarantee of twenty thousand."

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The answer from Haas was just as quick. "Done," he said with that smile.

There was a heavy silence in the room for a long moment, everyone's eyes darting from one to another. Finally, Carli rose, took a deep breath, and said, "Well, now that things are settled, I have to get back to the clinic." She stepped over to Cargo and gave him a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks, Danny. This means a lot to me."

After she left, Haas said to Cargo, "I'll see you back at the hotel, my friend. I have a few things to go over with Angie."

Cargo rose. "Sure."

Cargo left the bar, but instead of going back to the hotel, he crossed the narrow street and stepped into a small open-air hut filled with stacks of stolen canned goods for sale. Since he had not eaten yet that day, he picked out a can of albacore and had the merchant open it for him. At the counter, he laced it with white mustard and took a plastic fork. Sitting down on an upturned wooden box, he ate while he watched the front door of Rose's Bar.

Haas and Angie came out a quarter-hour later. For a minute or so, they stood together in conversation, then parted, Haas going in one direction, toward the Rittz, Angie in the opposite direction, toward the clinic. Cargo waited until they were far enough apart, then left the rest of his albacore on the box and hurried after Angie.

"Hey," he said, falling in beside her. "I was hoping to catch you alone. Are you in a hurry to get back?"

"What's on your mind, Danny?" she asked warily, even a little knowingly.

"I was wondering if maybe we could stop and have a cup of tea together."

Angie paused, studying him, and he knew she was weighing how critical he was to the hijack plan. "All right," she said finally. "Let's."

There was a tea shop nearby that Angie knew of, so they went there and ordered a pot of green tea.

"Well, we are having tea together, Danny," she said with an openness that he knew he should have expected. "What now?"

Danny shrugged. "I just hoped we could get to know each other, that's all."

"Are you sure you aren't just looking for a replacement for Carli?"

He felt himself blush. "I guess I might be," he admitted. "But not exactly in the way you might be thinking." He looked down at the green liquid circle in his cup. "Maybe I just need a friend."

"Why would you need a friend? You'll be gone from the Philippines in a few days."

"Maybe, maybe not. With part of my share of the money, I can probably bribe some official to cancel the visa. Then I could stay in Manila."

"Why would you want to stay in Manila?"

He wondered if she realized how difficult she was making it for him. "I don't really have a reason." He met her direct look with one of his own. "Yet," he added. Leaning forward on his elbows, he said, "Look, could we just lighten up this conversation a little?"

"All right." Angie sighed quietly and sipped a little tea.

"Where are you from, Angie?" he asked, looking for neutral ground.

"Chicago. You?"

"Houston."

She grunted softly, but with a slight smile. "A cowboy?"

"Kind of. Oil-rig cowboy." He liked the way her thin lips curved down at their corners even when she smiled. "How'd you end up in Manila?"

Now her smile morphed away. "Danny, let's not go there just yet."

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"Go where?"

"The past."

He nodded understandingly. "Dark secrets?"

"A couple of secrets, yes. I don't know about dark."

"If I manage to stay in Manila, will you tell me about them?"

She gave him another of her long, contemplative stares before finally answering. "Yes, if you want me to." She leaned forward a little. "I want you to know something, Danny. Your helping us with what we're doing means an awful lot, not just to Carli and me, but to everybody involved in Mary Magdalene Orphanage and the clinic. The Mother Superior, the nuns, the nurses, all the children, their mothers: There are many, *many* people who would thank you if they knew. But they don't, and never will. No one knows that anyone from the orphanage or the clinic is involved except the four of us, so you will never receive the gratitude you deserve—"

"Your gratitude is enough for me," Cargo interrupted. He took one of her hands across the little round table where they sat. Angie's eyes misted a little.

"Thank you, Danny." She withdrew her hand from his. "Now I really must go."

Outside the tea shop, as he watched her walk away, the morning sun making her short, tangled hair shine like copper, Cargo's expression became perplexed, because he could not resolve in his mind exactly what there was about Angie O'Brien that had reached out to him so quickly and grasped something inside him so completely. But with his perplexity, there was also a very warm feeling, a flicker of something that made him make up his mind at that moment that he was somehow going to remain in Manila.

Two days later, Danny Cargo's whole world blew up in his face. Nothing went wrong with the job itself; the hijacking of the truck and its aftermath, right up to the time he and Freddy Haas returned to Freddy's warehouse in Tondo, went off like clockwork.

They had watched the shipment of pharmaceuticals being off-loaded from the freighter *Vancouver* onto the DuPree truck parked on Pier 19. When the transfer was nearly complete, they had a waiting taxi take them to a corner a few blocks from where the hijacking was to take place. Some thirty minutes later, at the intersection of Kasibu and Matalon streets, they successfully commandeered the DuPree truck with no resistance at all from Heng, the Chinese driver, who was clearly indifferent to what happened to the truck and its load as long as he himself was not hurt.

The trip from the hijack point to the rented unit at the E-Z Storage facility was made without incident, and once there Haas bound the driver's wrists and ankles with nylon cord under several layers of three-inch adhesive tape from the clinic. He also used that tape to securely gag the man.

"You no leave me here to die, you no do that—please!" Heng begged just before he was gagged.

"Don't worry," Haas assured him with one of his artificial smiles. "We are thieves, not murderers. You will be released in three or four hours."

After locking Heng in the rented storage unit, Cargo and Haas drove to the small warehouse that Haas owned in Tondo, where they spent the next two hours sorting through the cartons of pharmaceuticals and setting aside the folic-acid boxes. The cartons were all stenciled in black letters with the name of their contents. In all, there ended up being thirty-two cartons of folic acid, each carton, according to

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the shipping invoice Haas had taken from the driver, containing two dozen bottles of the drug; seven hundred sixty-eight bottles, two hundred fifty tablets per bottle.

"Nearly two hundred thousand doses," Haas figured with his calculator-like mind. "That should make Carli and Angie very happy." He slapped Cargo on the back in another of his hollow gestures of camaraderie. "Come on, my friend, let's get the rest to my buyer and get our money."

They drove to another warehouse, in the Pulian district, this one bustling with activity, with a loading dock long enough to accommodate ten trucks at a time. Painted above the dock was: FONG LEE FONG—RESHIPMENT CO. LTD.

As soon as Danny had backed the truck into an empty space, four husky dock workers hauled a huge canvas tarpaulin onto its top and unrolled it down each side to conceal the DuPree Pharmaceuticals name and logo. At the same time, six others began unloading the truck at the rear.

"You can wait in the truck," Haas told Danny. "Since you are not in for a percentage, you don't need to be a party to the financial transaction. I'll be back in a while with your twenty thousand."

Danny did not like that arrangement, but he knew Haas was right; by his own choice, Danny was not a partner in the job, only a paid employee. Exiting the truck, Haas joined an Asian man of unclear origin holding a clipboard and checking off each carton as it was moved into the warehouse. When the truck was empty, Haas handed the man the packet with the shipment invoice and insurance documents taken from the hijacked driver. Together they went inside the warehouse.

Half an hour later, Haas returned to the loading dock carrying two canvas duffel bags, and gestured for Danny to join him. Danny got out and hopped up onto the dock. Haas handed him one of the two bags.

"Four hundred and fifty thousand pesos, my friend. A trifle more than the twenty thousand U.S. you have coming, but I can't be bothered counting small bills. Shall we go?"

An air-conditioned taxi was waiting on the street to take them to the Tondo district. Neither spoke on the way there, for fear the driver understood English. At the edge of the Tondo district, the two men dismissed the taxi, slung on their duffel bags, and walked the mile or so to the warehouse Haas owned, where they had left the cartons of folic acid.

"How much did you get for the load?" Danny could not help asking on the way. Haas laughed gleefully.

"Ah, don't you wish you knew! Having second thoughts about taking a flat guarantee, Danny?"

"No, just curious."

"Well, don't be. What's the old American saying? Curiosity killed the cat?" The German's voice lost its jovial tone. "You don't want to be the cat that was too curious, do you, Danny?"

Remembering the automatic that Haas carried in his belt, and deciding that those last words were clearly a warning, Danny replied, "No, Freddy, I don't."

At his warehouse, Haas said, "Danny, open a carton and pull out a bottle of that stuff, will you?" It was half request, half order.

Danny examined one of the cartons. It was securely sealed with filament tape. "I don't have anything to cut this tape," he said.

"You know, Danny," Haas smirked, "if you're going to be a successful criminal, you must learn to carry the tools of your trade. Here—" he tossed Danny a six-

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inch Italian switchblade stiletto. While Danny began carefully slicing the fibers of the tape, Haas studied him thoughtfully. After seeming to ponder something, he said, "You're not a bad fellow, Danny. How would you like to work for me on a permanent basis?"

"As what, a bellman at the Rittz?"

Haas laughed. "Come now, I'm sure Carli or Angie must have at least suggested to you that my little hovel of a hotel is merely a legitimate front for my more, shall we say, covert business."

"Which is?" Danny asked.

"Sex, dear boy. To be exact, sex *slavery*. Naturally, no one at the orphanage or the clinic is aware of this." He chuckled. "If they were, they wouldn't spit on me, much less do business with me. You see, I deal in young girls—*very* young girls: eleven and twelve are the favorite ages. I snatch them off the streets of Tondo and other stinking slum areas, and hold them captive in this very warehouse. After I collect half a dozen or so, I sell them to the captain of one of the foreign ships docked here—much as you previously did with your black-market fossil stone. Except that my product doesn't go to Honolulu to be used in furniture making; my product goes to places like Syria, Turkey, Pakistan, Algeria, to be used for—well, other purposes. How would you like to join me in that venture?"

"No, thanks," Cargo replied coldly. "That's not in my line."

"You'd make good money," Haas encouraged. "Right now, I can only manage, working alone, one sale of six units a month. But with the right assistant, I could probably triple that."

"I said no," Cargo repeated. "Forget it." He finished slicing the tape and put the stiletto aside. "When are we going to call DuPree to tell them where to find their driver?"

"We aren't," Haas replied matter-of-factly. "Don't ask foolish questions. Did you really think we were? The man has *seen* us, he can *identify* us." Haas chuckled again. "Besides, one Chink more or less won't matter to anyone."

"If we leave him there, he'll suffocate from the heat."

"Probably," Haas agreed absently. Coming over to the now open carton, he removed a bottle of folic-acid pills and hefted it in one of his hamlike hands as if it were a trophy of some sort. "I'm going to show this," he said, a leer spreading over his face, "to sweet young Carli, and before agreeing to deliver the rest of the shipment extract from her a, ah, shall we say, little extra charge for my services. She's such a dedicated young woman, so devoted to those freakish children, I'm sure in order to get the rest of these, she'll do anything I ask of her—"

As Haas turned away, Danny picked up the stiletto and buried its thin silver blade all the way into the side of the German's neck.

Gasping, throat throbbing in a panic reflex, esophagus shriveling inside him, blood spurting around the pearl handle of the knife sticking out of his neck, Haas reached for the pistol in his belt.

Danny Cargo was a split second faster and got to the gun first.

While Manfred Haas was thrashing and kicking on the floor, gurgling like a stuck hog, desperately trying not to die, Danny retrieved the DuPree truck driver's cell phone, scrolled the call menu, and telephoned the pharmaceutical company's number. To the woman who answered, he gave the name of E-Z Storage and the street he remembered it being on, so that their driver could be rescued.

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Then Danny transferred the money from his duffel bag into the larger one that Haas had carried, and tossed the extracted bottle of folic acid pills in with it. As soon as the German stopped writhing, Danny stripped him of his clothes, identification, and keys, pulled the knife from his neck, wiped up the blood, and rolled the cell phone and everything else except the warehouse keys into a bundle. Taking that, he dragged Haas out a back door, eased his body into a six-foot-deep open sewage trench, waited until it sank, then tossed the bundle in after it and watched as the putrid brown sewage stream floated it slowly away.

"So long, Freddy," he said to himself.

It was late afternoon as Danny, the duffel bag slung on one shoulder, hiked deeper into the Tondo district to the Mary Magdalene Orphanage clinic. Inside, he found the same young woman in white novitiate habit that he had spoken to the day he was released.

"Hello," she smiled up at him. "I remember you. Looking for Nurse Gomez again?"

"Actually, no," Danny smiled back. "I'm looking for Angie O'Brien this time."

The young novitiate frowned. "I'm sorry, who did you say?"

"Angie O'Brien. She works in the pharmacy—"

"Oh, you mean Sister Angela. Just a moment, please—"

Sister Angela? The words stung him, sharply.

Danny was only remotely aware of the young woman speaking into the telephone on her reception desk. His brain was in a sudden turmoil, his thoughts a bedlam of disorder. For a brief, insane moment, he felt as if he were the only person on the face of the earth, all alone, with no idea what to do next.

Then he heard her voice.

"Hello, Danny."

She stood in a white summer nun's habit, a white cowl covering her clipped red hair, those usually piercing dark eyes of hers seeming somehow softer, but not even the hint of a smile on her thin lips.

"Shall we talk outside?" she said, taking his arm.

One side of the clinic wing was in shade, and they stood there to talk.

"So this is the secret you said you had." Danny's voice was strained.

"One of them, yes."

"Is there another?"

"Yes. The other is Carli."

As she spoke Carli's name, the young Filipina nurse came outside and joined them. Nurse and nun stood side by side, each reaching for the other's hand. Seeing that, Danny felt inert, as if some kind of narcosis had overcome him. Suddenly he was very tired, experiencing a fatigue that overcame the nervous tension of the long day of robbery and murder, and now the astonishment of this crushing moment.

"We didn't want to hurt you, Danny," Sister Angela said quietly.

"No," Danny muttered, "I don't believe you did."

"We had to think of the children first—"

"I know. I—understand." He looked at Carli. "I asked before if you were happy. You said you were."

"I am, Danny." She squeezed Sister Angela's hand. "I'm very happy."

"Okay, then." Danny unzipped the duffel bag and handed Carli the bottle of folic acid. "The rest is in Freddy's warehouse. Thirty-two cartons." He handed the keys to Sister Angela, their hands brushing briefly. "You know where the warehouse is?"

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"Yes. Is Freddy there?"

"No."

"Where is he?"

"Gone," Danny said.

At the way he said it, the two women exchanged glances and asked nothing further.

Zipping the duffel back up, Danny slung it once more, threw the two women a sad wink, and silently walked away. Behind him, he heard their farewells.

"Take care, Danny," said Carli.

"God bless, Danny," Sister Angela added.

On his way out of Tondo, Danny had to walk past Smoky Mountain. As in the early morning, waiting for the night collection trucks, now in the early evening the people who scavenged the unspeakable filth were waiting once again, this time for the day collection trucks. Bent, toothless old people mingled with skinny, ragged children, twitching drug addicts with hungry young mothers and their babies, stray dogs with greasy rats.

Shouldering his way through the restless, anxious press of bodies, Danny's eyes scanned faces that reminded him of a documentary film he had once viewed about the Nazi concentration camps of World War II, and how the survivors of those camps had looked. But the people he saw here, he knew, were not prisoners of an inhumane society, but rather of a modern government that chose to ignore them to death. Through poverty and indifferent neglect, their problem was left to solve itself by attrition. Danny thought of the penal camp at Palayan. Even the lowliest convict there was better off than those who fed off Smoky Mountain.

When he was almost past the huge dump, Danny abruptly turned back. Stepping across an open sewage trench, he began to wade up and through the swamp of rotting garbage, the stench assaulting his nostrils, meth haze burning his eyes, shoes slogging as the mire became deeper. Breath laboring, nausea building, he finally trudged his way to the top. Below and all around him, the waiting people were chattering and pointing at him.

Unslinging and opening the duffel, Danny grabbed two handfuls of loose pesos and held them up high.

"Come and get it!" he yelled, and flung the money into the air.

The mass of people at the bottom rushed toward him like a tidal wave.

"Come on!" he yelled. "Come on! Come on!"

Grabbing more handfuls, he threw the currency as far as he could, in all directions. Again and again he reached into the duffel bag and scooped out money to throw, and he continued to yell.

"Come on! Come on!"

People surged around him like a raging fire, but no one came really close to him; they were fearful that he was a crazy man. Besides, no one wanted to interfere with the blizzard of money he was creating.

"Come on! Come on! Take it!"

Danny showered the impoverished of Tondo with money until the duffel was empty. Then, impoverished himself, he waded back down and out of Smoky Mountain.

He did not at all dread the thought of Palayan and the penal camp he was sure to be sent back to.

The air up there, after all, was clean and pure. ●

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A THIN BRIGHT LINE

by Dixon Hill

Sanford M. Chase kept his hands at ten and two on the wheel of his Mercedes SL550. The two-seat roadster sang with design perfection, 382 horses straining to be unleashed. But Sandy held them in check with knife-edge control.

From the corner of his eye, he watched his dark-haired wife snap her compact and drop it into her purse. He smiled at the power pulsing through his fingertips, enjoyed his wife's beauty.

The semi ahead pulled rapidly away. A yellow Volkswagen passed in the left lane. The green sedan coming up behind was signaling to follow. Everyone was speeding on this stretch of empty desert. Everyone but Sandy, who always obeyed the speed limit.

Jennifer reached up and grabbed his rearview mirror. She looked at her reflection as she applied a new coat of lipstick, then turned the mirror back around.

Sandy's right hand snapped from wheel to mirror, finessing the angle. "What? You didn't use the Cosmonaut Lipstick?" His voice held a smirk.

"God, no!" Her cool voice floated across the leather interior of the Mercedes. "Your dad's crazy. That stuff is hard as a rock. I have to smash my lips to put it on."

A gift from Sandy's father, who had purchased it on a business trip to Russia, the lipstick came in a huge steel tube the size of a small flashlight, with a ring on the bottom. Instead of twisting it, a complicated spring assembly pushed the lipstick out of the tube. Sandy joked that it was designed for female cosmonauts, so now they called it Cosmonaut Lipstick. Jennifer seldom used it because it was much harder and thicker than the creamy Western kind.

Sandy laughed. "You know, when I was a kid, I thought my dad was a spy for the CIA or something."

"I still don't see why we couldn't stay in Vegas. Your father's birthday din-

Dixon Hill spent ten years in the army (as a military intelligence analyst and a Green Beret explosives expert) before returning to his native Scottsdale, Arizona, to pursue what he thought would be a degree in engineering. A college writing class changed all that: He shifted his major to journalism, earned his degree, and is now a stay-at-home dad and a writer who contributes frequently to magazines and newspapers.

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ner isn't until *tomorrow* night."

"I want to see my brother first. You know that."

Jennifer turned to look out the window. Sandy knew she wasn't watching the cactus flash past. He understood why she was keyed up about going to Phoenix, how she felt about his brother's children.

The semi had pulled well ahead now. The Volkswagen was long gone, the green car beginning to move away in the left lane. Sunlight glinted off something on the shoulder of the road, maybe a mile ahead. Sandy slowed to get a better look. A middle-aged man in jeans and a work shirt stood behind a brown sedan that was more than a few years old. He was trying to flag down a car, but no one was stopping.

Sandy signaled and slowed.

"What are you doing?" She turned to look at him.

"That guy needs help. A car that old—he probably doesn't have a cell phone. Out here in this desert . . ." He glanced at Jennifer, hesitating. "Jen, if he's got kids in there, he's in trouble. They need help."

She whipped her head around to look at the car, but they were already past it; the Mercedes was pulling into the breakdown lane. Sandy slowed to a stop, then reversed and looked through the roadster's tiny rear window as he backed toward the stalled car. He thought he had seen a flat rear tire as they went past.

He stopped the car, hit the trunk latch button, and got out. A thin hot wind was blowing. He yelled across it, "Got trouble?"

"Got a flat!"

"Spare flat, too?" he yelled over his shoulder as he opened the trunk and pulled out a can of Flat Patch. He heard Jennifer open her door, felt the car shift as she got out. He heard the guy's footsteps on the pavement and turned to look at him, holding the can of Flat Patch. "When I drive through a place like this, I always take—"

In his left hand, the man held a gun. A snub-nosed revolver. He had it pointed at Sandy's belly. With his back to traffic, none of the passing cars could see the gun in his hand. It would look as if the two men were just talking. "Give me your keys."

Sandy blinked. "They're in the car."

The guy backed around him, to the driver's door. "Get in, lady." He held the gun just above roof level, so Jennifer could see it. She got in the car. Sandy could see her doing something.

So could the guy. "What are you doing?" he barked.

"Fastening my seat belt."

"Forget it! Close your door." He turned to Sandy. "Don't be a hero. I'll try to drop her off someplace. You call the cops, and I'll use her as a hostage. Hostages get killed, buddy." He dropped into the driver's seat and shut the door. Then he drove away. Sandy just stood there, watching the car dwindle into the distance.

A semi blasted past, buffeting Sandy, almost knocking him over. He shook his head and looked around. Then he ran back to the brown sedan and took the keys from the ignition. The interior was a mess of fast-food wrappers, empty bottles. It smelled. Smelled like an animal's den. He walked past the flat rear tire to the trunk. He needed to change that tire—fast.

He popped the trunk. A Jackson Pollock in blood. Bright red and wet, brown and dry, dark and pasty. Splashed across every surface: the sides, the bottom, even the underside of the trunk lid. And two young women's bodies. Black with blood—thick, coagulating clumps of it from vicious wounds.

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I'll try to drop her off someplace.

Sandy dropped the can of Flat Patch. He heard it hit the pavement and roll a few feet. The sound did something to him. He slammed the trunk, grabbed the can, and ran to the flat tire. He knelt on the pavement in shock without knowing it. Didn't know he tore his chinos on a piece of broken glass, didn't feel the glass cut his knee. Instead, he felt the pull of blessed, ignorant unconsciousness.

He drove it back with anger.

His hands shook as he tried to screw the nozzle on the Flat Patch to the tire's valve stem. He cross-threaded it twice, wasting precious seconds. And then the can was on, the valve popped open, he heard the whoosh as the sticky compound and compressed air shot out of the can into the flat tire. The car rose like an aged sprinter preparing for a final race.

The tire was still low, but good enough to drive on if he kept his speed down. He unscrewed the can and tossed it. Then he climbed behind the wheel.

It was an old Crown Victoria, late '80s or early '90s model. He turned the key and the engine caught, idled roughly. He heard the lifters and knew it needed oil. The gas gauge registered about an eighth of a tank; he prayed it would be enough.

He looked up through the windshield then, saw a red streak that ran from the paved shoulder of the road into the right lane. A thin bright line, bright red, maybe a quarter of an inch thick. He blinked his eyes, thinking he must be imagining it. But the line was still there. It ran from about where the Mercedes had been parked, and seemed to follow where he had seen it go. He had no idea what it was, but somehow he knew it was a sign that he should follow, a trail that would lead to his wife. If he was quick enough. If he was lucky.

Sandy threw the Crown Vic into drive and stomped the gas. The police pursuit engine under the hood roared and the huge sedan shot forward along the shoulder of the highway, bucking on the bad left rear. He glanced over his shoulder, saw an opening in traffic, then steered onto the freeway and floored it.

Almost immediately, the Vic began to wobble. The low tire didn't want to do its job. He backed off the accelerator a little, let the speed drop a bit. The wobble got worse. He gentled it back up. As the car ran faster, he knew, centrifugal force would help the tire stand taller. The wobble began to abate slightly. But at fifty, it returned with a vengeance. The wheel jerked in his hands.

He throttled down and ran at forty-five. The car wasn't happy, but it was controllable. Running down the highway at forty-five miles an hour. The SL550 was capable of three times that speed. The thin red line ran straight up the road, disappearing into the distance. How far behind his wife was he getting?

At first, when the guy in the tan work shirt and jeans stole the car, Jennifer tried not to look at him. As the SL550 accelerated out of the breakdown lane and left the shoulder of the road behind, she watched Sandy shrink in her side mirror.

"What are you looking at?"

"My husband. Thank you for not killing him."

"Why would I kill a man?"

The question bothered her. He sounded as if he meant exactly what he had said. Not: "Why would I kill anyone?" It was: "Why would I kill a *man*?"

For several miles, they traveled in silence. The creep turned off the radio. She heard him move on the leather driver's seat. "Look at me." His voice was gruff.

She turned to face him, determined not to let him see her fear.

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"Where were you headed?"

"Why?"

"I ask the questions! This can be a long ride. Or it can be short and painful. Your call." He looked like the sort of man you would trust to work on your car in the neighborhood garage. He had thick, dark, wavy hair over a face the color of lightly toasted bread. His teeth weren't good, but they weren't too bad. But his lying blue eyes were the worst; they looked open and honest.

"Phoenix," she told him.

"Why Phoenix?"

"Relatives."

"Relatives! Family is hell." He stared out the windshield, ignoring her.

Family is hell. Jennifer turned away to look out her side window. She liked Doug and Sue—Sandy's brother and his wife. It was their four kids who made her uncomfortable, envious.

Instead of children, Sandy and Jen had money. Not tied down, the couple jumped whenever the organization Sandy worked for suggested a move. With no parent-teacher conferences or Little League games, Sandy put in hours that impressed his superiors.

Jennifer did her part, too. Stayed in tip-top shape, closely studied fashions, handled house cleaners and caterers, haggled with dry cleaners. At get-togethers, she mingled just enough, staying within Sandy's orbit. Her clothes were right behind the latest trend, so that everyone admired them—but not too much.

She accessed the organization's Web site from home, using Sandy's passwords, to find out "who's who" in any new region they moved to, then made tip sheets for Sandy. She also built larger files, based on responses from wives whom she wrote requesting information on florists, grocers, housing, etc. The return letters and e-mails nearly always included important tidbits that gave Sandy a leg up.

For years she took pride in the way she engineered Sandy's extra edge at work. But lately, she had come to doubt her happiness.

While Sandy read books like *Leadership Secrets of Genghis Khan*, Jennifer increasingly saw herself as the twenty-first century equivalent of a Mongol "camp follower." She was like the women who moved with Khan's army, making warm, soft places for their men to return after battle. The place where warriors found food and comfort.

Where children ran and played.

The Vic's engine developed a knock. The gas gauge was getting dangerously low. Sandy willed the car to go faster, but every time he tried to get it up over forty-five, the rear tire threatened to shake the damn thing apart.

He saw a blue highway billboard ahead. It held the upcoming exit number. But there were no little inset signs indicating a gas station. He needed air in the tire. Needed a new tire if he could get one quickly. Needed to get gas—soon.

The Vic passed the exit, then under an overpass. He stared into the distance, trying to spot a gas station up ahead in the afternoon sun. The highway ran straight and flat. No overpass that he could see. The thin red line ran away ahead of him.

In her imagination, Jennifer heard a clanking she didn't want the car thief to hear. She leaned forward and turned on the radio.

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He snapped it off. "No radio! It's all lies, anyway."

She could still hear it. Finally, she turned to him, used her voice to fill the silence, cover the noise. "So, where are we going?"

"What?"

"You told my husband you'd drop me off. I was wondering where."

"Why? So you can call CPS?"

"CPS?" Maybe he didn't know that the highway patrol in Arizona was called DPS—the Department of Public Safety.

"CPS! You know. They break up families. Steal your kids. Make your wife go away."

"Child Protective Services?"

He wrenched his head around and glared at her. Gone was any vestige of openness, of goodness. His blue eyes glinted with insanity. "They don't protect nobody! They stole my kids, sent my wife away. They all need to die—CPS, Selma, Katy, Lucinda. They need to die!" He struck the steering wheel with his hand. The car jumped into the next lane. Jennifer managed to keep silent, but just barely. If there had been another car beside them, or a semi . . .

But he didn't notice. Didn't seem to realize they had changed lanes. Jennifer rubbed her fingers against her palms trying to fight the icy cold that blossomed there.

The knock was getting worse. Now Sandy also heard an intermittent ping. His hands were numb from the vibrating steering wheel. The car wanted to drift left. He kept having to correct the steering to hold course.

All four windows were down, and a hot wind blew through the car so that sweat ran down his face and neck. But if he rolled them up, the smell of those bodies in the trunk would be overwhelming.

Sandy felt a presence beside him, as if someone were staring over his shoulder. He looked to his left. A highway patrol car was matching his speed.

Sandy felt an insane urge to smile and wave at the officer. Instead, he tried to concentrate on his driving. He worked to fight the shimmy caused by the rear wheel, so he wouldn't get pulled over for operating an unsafe vehicle. The patrol car siren split the air right beside him. Sandy jumped and looked over, terrified. The patrol car shot forward and disappeared down the highway, lights flashing. His heart tried to beat its way out of his chest.

And then, on the horizon, an overpass with buildings off to one side. He strained to see into the distance. Then he glanced at the fuel gauge. Nearly empty. Numb fingers clamped the wheel as he seemed to inch down the road.

Finally, he passed a sign with an exit number on it and smaller inset signs indicating a gas station, convenience store, and fast food. A minute later, he headed up the exit ramp, breaking off the chase for a pit stop, watching the red line disappear up the highway he was forced to leave. How fast could he do it?

"Whattayoucare?"

His voice was low, but Jennifer's heart jumped. She turned to look at him. "What?"

"You deaf? I said what do you care?"

"I don't. I just thought . . ."

"Thought CPS was right; that's what you thought. You want to call them in

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like Selma." His voice dropped. Jennifer could hardly hear the next sentence. "They made her leave me."

"I'm sorry."

"What the hell for? They take your kids? No, you're too 'Miss High and Mighty,' 'Miss Rich Bitch.' Nobody's gonna take your kids."

She looked out the window again, stared at the thin shoulder beside the car. This part of the highway was older, undivided; a double yellow line was all that separated the opposing flows of traffic.

"I said look at me!"

She took a deep breath and turned.

"They'll never take your rich kids."

It was too much. Something had to give. "I don't have any kids. Never did." She heard the knife edge in her voice. He didn't seem to notice.

"Why not?"

"I can't."

He turned to look fully at her, seemed to study her for a few moments, the car sailing down the highway at nearly eighty, cactus whizzing by, cars and trucks all around, right next to the center line with oncoming traffic just a few feet away.

"I can't. And you should watch the damn road."

Rage began to mount his face, then something else seemed to take over. It forced down the rage, torqued a smiling rictus across his face, turned his head around to look forward. The tires gave a soft squeal as he turned the wheel, taking the car around a bend.

Sandy pulled the Vic onto the apron of the gas station. He climbed out and stuck his credit card in the pump, opened the gas cap, and jammed in the nozzle. Once the fuel began to flow, he walked over to look at the service bay.

An old man in a gray jumpsuit saw him coming and stood up. "Need some work done?"

"I need a tire mounted on a rim and inflated." He felt naked standing there.

"Uh-huh. What kind o' tire?"

"For a Crown Victoria. But I need it fast. If it's going to take awhile, I'll have to go without it. I'll pay an extra fifty to get it within five minutes."

The gray eyebrows shot up. "Five minutes?" He turned and walked off into the service bay. A moment later, he came out with a small hand cart. "Gimme the keys to the trunk an' I'll get started."

The bodies. The blood. "What? What do you need to get in the trunk for?"

"Relax, fella. I just want to take out the flat. We'll put the new one on that rim. Save ya' a bit."

"No!"

"No?"

"I don't want . . . I don't have a spare in my trunk. That's why I want the tire mounted on a rim. I want a good spare for going through the desert."

The old man leaned back and looked at him. "Well, I guess that makes sense. How'd you get out here before you decided that? Didn't you know you didn't have no spare before you started out?"

"It's . . . It's my brother's car. I didn't know till I got a flat."

"You drove here on a flat tire?"

"I put a can of Flat Patch in it."

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"Oh, son. Now that stuff makes a real mess. It'll take me a lot longer than five minutes to fix that."

"No."

"Yes. It will. That stuff just gets everywhere."

Sandy pinched the bridge of his nose with his fingers. *Damn!* he thought. *I should have told him I changed the flat with the spare and accidentally left the flat tire out on the highway.* But it was too late to change his story now. He looked up.

The old man was wheeling his cart toward the Vic. *The smell,* thought Sandy. *If he gets close, he'll know.* He ran after the old guy and put one hand on his shoulder to stop him. "Look, I'm in a hurry. I don't want that tire changed. I just want a new spare. You give me the spare; I'll put it in the car. If I need it, I'll have it."

The old man shook his head. "That there's a bad idea, son. That Flat Patch stuff clumps up and throws off the balance. The tire's not stable."

"Look! I don't give a damn! Just sell me a mounted tire."

Sandy heard a footstep on the pavement behind him. "Is there a problem here?"

As Sandy turned, he heard the old man say, "This here boy wants to drive that highway on a tire he fixed with Flat Patch, Sheriff. He wants a new tire, but he's gonna use it as a spare. You wanna tell him how crazy that is?"

Sandy looked at the lawman, who had just walked up behind him. The old man was wrong. It wasn't the sheriff. It was the highway patrol officer who had paced the car earlier.

"So you're barren."

He made her sound like a used tampon wrapper. "Yeah." She was angry. She wasn't thinking, almost reached for her cigarettes in the glove compartment, then stopped herself. The glove compartment was not for now.

Instead, she picked up her purse, rooted around inside, and came out with a cigar tube. She didn't smoke often. But sometimes, when the stress became too much, she had to.

"What the hell's that? A cigar?"

She opened the tube and dumped out the battered Virginia Slim inside it. "Cigarette." She lit the cigarette and took a long drag, then blew out the smoke. "If it bothers you, pull over. I'll get out and smoke on the side of the road. You can keep on going."

"Right. You'd like that."

She sat smoking. She knew she shouldn't make him angry, but she couldn't help it.

"You're barren. You're lucky. They can't take your kids away, brainwash them, turn them against you. That's what they did to Katy and Lucinda."

She held the cigarette and blew out a stream of smoke. She thought she heard that sound again. Wanted to distract him. But it was like walking through a minefield; had to watch your step. "Turned them against you?"

"They *did*. Last time I saw them, I tried to hug them. Put my arms around little Lucinda, and she started screaming. Poor little thing, three years old and a cast on her arm. Then Katy, she told me to let go. I told her I'd make her other eye black if she sassed me like that again. Then those old bats came up and took them away. Led my good little girls away down the hall. Told them they'd never have to see me again. I would've killed them if they didn't have those four big cops standing there. They all need to die. The old bats, Selma, Katy, Lucinda."

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"Why do your children have to die?"

"They aren't my good little girls anymore. Knew not to step out of line when I was their dad. But they brainwashed them. Taught 'em to sass back. They're no good now. Need to end their suffering. Put things right."

Jennifer didn't know what to say. What might set him off. He was close to the edge. All at once, he slowed way down, pulled onto the shoulder, and then turned off the highway onto a dirt road.

The highway patrol officer stood with his hands on his Sam Browne belt and looked at Sandy. "Do you have money for a new tire?"

"Yes, sir. I told him I'd pay extra to get it in five minutes. I'm in a real hurry."

"But you don't want him to fix the flat you got on the car?"

"Right. I'm in a hurry."

"I can't let you take a car out on the highway with a problem like that." He pointed at the brown Vic. "That's your car. Right?"

"It's my . . . my brother's."

"I thought I saw you driving it earlier. You were barely doing forty-five, and the car seemed to have a shimmy. That's probably because of that tire. You need to get it fixed. Or I'll have to impound your vehicle until you do. It's a hazard."

"That's what I told him, Sheriff. I'll just put this cart back. Gimme the keys, fella, and I'll drive it into the bay. Have you on your way in no time."

If that old man bent down and changed the tire, right next to the trunk, he was going to smell those bodies. Sandy looked at the cop, who was staring and beginning to look suspicious. He pulled the keys out of his pocket and handed them to the old man. "Okay. But please, make it as fast as you can. And remember, there's no spare in the trunk, so don't worry about it."

The old man took the keys. "Good man." Then he walked toward the car.

The highway patrolman shook his head. "I don't know what your hurry is, but maybe you should rethink your priorities."

"Sure. Sure, I'll do that." The lawman kept his gaze fixed on Sandy. "If you'll excuse me, Officer. I'm . . . I'm going to buy a few things in the store."

The lawman nodded his head. "You do that." Then he walked over to his patrol car and sat in the driver's seat.

The Crown Vic started up and the old man swung around the pumps, pulling it into the service bay. Sandy felt light-headed, as if he had been under water for too long. As he walked across the apron, his shoes clicking on the cracked concrete, he saw the cop talking on his radio. He wondered if he was calling in the car's plates. Hoped to hell the damn thing wasn't stolen.

Pushing open the door of the convenience store connected to the gas station, he nearly knocked over an old woman carrying a sandwich thick with cheese. The woman held her nose, and Sandy understood why.

She walked quickly around him and over to the service bay. "Scratch! You gotta take this now."

Sandy heard the old man grumble. He came out of the bay saying, "I can't eat right now, Marian. I got me a rush job on the rack."

The old lady shoved the sandwich into his outstretched hands. "Ever since you got that operation, you ain't been able to smell a darn thing, say you gotta eat things that taste strong to even taste it. Now I don't usually complain—even though I gotta live with ya. But the stink of this limburger cheese sandwich is

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gettin' me and it's gonna drive off the customers. Now take it back in there with you, you old coot."

"Aw. All right." He took the plate and walked back into the bay.

Sandy laughed. Then he caught himself, afraid his relief was too obvious. He shook his head. Everything was surreal.

In the store, he bought two quarts of oil, a jug of anti-freeze, and a Coke.

The Mercedes was creeping now, inching down the dirt road. At first, the guy tried to drive faster. But the low-slung roadster kept hanging up on rocks, throwing it out of control. The car refused to negotiate the rutted dirt road at anything above a crawl.

They had been traveling that way for nearly twenty minutes. Jennifer sneaked a peek at the speedometer; they were doing just over five miles an hour.

"What are you looking at?"

She jumped. "You . . . I was wondering what you did after your wife left you." As soon as she said it, she cursed herself.

"Killed the bitch!"

"Killed . . . ?"

"Driving long haul. Load of copper from Bisbee to El Paso. She was standing next to the road, hitchhiking. Pulled over and opened the passenger door of the cab for her. She took one look at me and wouldn't get in. Hightailed it. I took the next exit, went around and looked for her, but she must've hid in the scrub."

He held up the snub-nosed revolver. "That's when I bought my little convincer. Figured I'd use it next time. And I caught 'er, on the way back from El Paso. There she stood, hitchhiking back the other way, going toward Bisbee. She was wearing a disguise, but it didn't fool me. I pulled over and opened the door. I figure she thought her disguise was pretty damn good."

He chuckled. "She climbed right in and shut the door behind her. I took her to a little spot in the middle of the desert. She screamed when she found out I knew who she was. Kept trying to fool me. Told me over and over how I had the wrong person. But I knew."

His eyes looked misty as he peered through the windshield at the dirt road ahead. "And how she screamed. She screamed and screamed." It was a whisper.

Sandy stepped out of the small store and nearly bumped into the highway patrolman. "Mr. Curtis."

Sandy stared at him, then realized the cop was talking to him, calling him by a strange name.

"Mr. Curtis? I ran your brother's plates."

Sandy nodded. "Oh . . . oh I . . . I see."

The lawman nodded. "Not a very good man, your brother."

Sandy shook his head. The plastic bag with the oil and anti-freeze seemed to double in weight. The can of Coke sweated in his other hand. "No . . . I suppose not."

"You married, Mr. Curtis? Your wife with you?"

Sandy shook his head. "No, she's not. Why?"

The cop leaned in a little closer. "I think you know why."

Sandy tried to back up a step, but banged into the glass door. "Look, Officer, my brother and I . . . I'm not like him. I'm not like him at all." All at once, the injus-

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tice of the situation rose up, overcame him. His wife was out there with a madman, and he was stuck with a broken-down piece of junk with two bodies stuffed in it. "I just . . . just borrowed his car. And it's been nothing but a pain in the ass! I wish we weren't related. I really do."

The patrolman backed up, his face registering surprise. "Just doing my job, Mr. Curtis." He turned and walked away, climbed back behind the wheel of the patrol car.

Sandy took a deep breath and pushed off toward the repair bay. He got there as the old man was mounting the new tire on the car. Sandy walked around the car, which was raised on a hydraulic piston, and sat in a cheap, grease-smeared plastic chair against the wall.

He watched as a highway patrol car came in off the highway and pulled up outside. It was met by the one that had paced him earlier. The two officers spoke through their driver's windows. The one who had run the car's plates pointed a thumb over his shoulder. Sandy saw the other officer look inside, give him the once-over. A second later, the car came down with a hiss of hydraulics, cutting him off from view. The two patrol cars separated. The one that paced him earlier crossed the overpass, turned left, and entered the highway going back the other way.

"That'll be ninety bucks, son."

Sandy gave the man five twenties. While the old man went to ring up the sale, Sandy popped the hood. He checked the oil and added a quart and a half, then he filled the radiator overflow tank. He shut the hood just before the old man came back with his change.

Sandy hopped in the Vic, started the engine, backed out, and drove away.

It seemed he had spent a month at the gas station, but according to his watch it had only been a half-hour. Still, the sun was starting to get low in the sky. It would soon turn orange, darken, and go down. He took the entry ramp down to the highway, where he saw the red line—fainter now, but still there. He followed it.

The creep had been stone quiet for over an hour now, as they made their way slowly along the dirt road in the gathering dusk. Jennifer hoped he would keep quiet. She wasn't sure how much more she could take.

Then she realized he was talking low, almost growling. She tried not to listen.

"A month later, I saw my little Lucinda. Out there on the road, all slutted up. Thumb in the air. I pulled over and she just climbed right in. Don't even think she knew who I was. Told me she would sleep with me if I wanted. I slit her throat right there, when she said it, cruising down I-40 at seventy-five. Got blood all over the cab. Took me hours to clean, and it still left a stain. Told the boss I got a nosebleed. He charged me for a new interior, so I quit."

Ten minutes out, Sandy hit his first break since running into the madman.

A highway patrol car flashed past, lights and siren blaring. Two minutes later, Sandy saw the wreck. Several cars were piled up in the oncoming lanes. Highway patrol cars were congregating on the spot, with ambulances.

A moment later, he was over the next rise, leaving the accident behind. With the highway patrol concentrated behind him, and the car in the best shape he could hope for, he put the hammer down.

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The Vic ate up the highway. He flashed by cars, speedometer reading ninety-five. And then the highway narrowed and he hit an old stretch of road that was no longer divided. He roared down the left lane, next to the double yellow centerline, feet away from oncoming traffic, flashing his headlights to get slower cars to make way.

He had no idea how long he ran at full speed, carefully maintaining control of the old Vic, keeping one eye on the center line and the cars ahead and the other on the thin red line that led to his wife. But suddenly he passed a semi, and the line was gone.

He swerved into the slow lane and hit the brakes. The angry air horn of the semi he had just passed blared as the truck whisked around to avoid him. The Vic slewed to the right, but he held it, muscled the steering wheel to keep it on the road, forced it to slow, then he let it drift over onto the dirt shoulder. The car left pavement and bounced over the graded dirt of the roadway. He brought it to a stop. Then he turned to look over his shoulder.

Throwing the car into reverse, he backed the Vic up the shoulder beside cars whipping past at seventy-five and eighty, increasing speed as he went, watching the pavement for any sign of the red line.

And there it was. The thin red line turned and ran right off the pavement. Sandy hit the brakes, and saw a dirt road. The jerk had taken his roadster up a dirt road! For the first time in over an hour, he smiled. He spun the wheel and kicked the accelerator. The car shot down the dirt road, bouncing and bumping at a good clip. With the Crown Vic's ground clearance, he had the edge.

The Mercedes was dented and dusty when they reached a paved road. The creep drove onto it and turned right. There wasn't a car in sight. The sun had just gone down. The world was dark.

"Two weeks later, I saw my little Katy. All grown up, somehow. They did it. She was standing out there thumbing a ride. When I pulled over in that car, she tried to run. I caught her. Took good care of her. And now they're out there. Katy and Lucinda. I see them. Sometimes with their mom. Sometimes alone. And I take care of them. Take care of my good little girls. Punish their mom for what they did to us."

He turned the wheel and the Mercedes bumped off the pavement onto a dirt track that ran around behind a hill. The creep stopped the car, dowsed the lights. Then he turned, pointing the gun at Jennifer.

The sun was nearly down as Sandy raced the Vic over the dirt road, spraying rocks behind him, fishtailing through deep dust, regaining traction on hardpan. He kept his foot down, an iron grasp on the wheel, forcing the car to obey. His headlights caught quick flecks of red on small rocks, short streaks on hardpan. Then he slammed on the brakes, muscling the car to a stop. The sun had set, and in his headlights he saw pavement. And a thin red line, petering out now, no longer strong and continuous, running up and turning right.

He followed the line.

"End of the road. Get out."

Jennifer opened her door. She heard him open his, felt the car lean as he got out. She reached forward and opened the glove compartment, grabbed the .45

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automatic, and turned, firing twice.

The slugs punched him down, spun him around on the ground. A moment later headlights bathed the area and she heard a car slide to a stop. She tried to see, but dust billowed up and cloaked everything. Then she heard Sandy.

"Jennifer! Jennifer!"

"Over here!" She stood up out of the car. "Sandy! I'm over here. I shot him."

She heard shoes scrambling through dirt. He emerged from the dust, eyes mad with fear. "Jennifer! Are you all right?"

"Yes. Yes. I got him." They grabbed each other. "How did you get here?"

"Took his car." He stared at her. "He's got bodies in the trunk! Two women."

She nodded. "He's crazy."

He stuck out his hand. "Give me the pistol." She handed it over and he rounded the car. She followed. The creep was gone. His pistol lay on the front seat.

Sandy snatched it up and turned to her. "There's a lot of blood. You hit him, and he won't get far with a .45 slug in him. If he's not already dead, he will be soon. But we have another problem."

"What?"

"I drove his car. I've got fingerprints and DNA all over it. And he's got bodies in the trunk."

Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. She worked it loose. "They're after you. They want you; they always have . . ."

"I know."

She looked into his eyes. "Burn it. You have to."

"The two women. In the trunk."

"They're dead. They won't care."

He nodded.

They made a quick plan. Sandy wiped down the interior of the Vic with a rag. Then he took a screwdriver and removed the license plates, putting them into the Mercedes' trunk. As he did this, Jennifer put on a pair of gloves. All the time they worked, he held the .45 and Jennifer held on to the snub-nosed revolver. Bravely opening the trunk, she searched the bodies. She found a wallet on each of them. Her eyes were wet when she closed the lid. "Oh God. It's so terrible."

"Toss the wallets in those bushes. The cops will find them and contact their families." Sandy put a hand on his wife's shoulder. "It's better this way. They'll ID them through dental records. Seeing them all cut up . . . identifying them that way . . ." He shook his head.

Using the siphon hose from the SL550's trunk, Sandy sucked gasoline from the Vic's fuel tank and spread it around the interior. After that, he let the hose run out on the ground, gasoline puddling around it.

When everything was ready, Jennifer drove the SL550 out to the paved road and looked both ways. No headlights in sight—she beeped the horn twice. A moment later, Sandy sprinted up and climbed into the passenger seat. As the Mercedes pulled onto the pavement, an echoing *crack* split the night; a flaming orange fireball boiled into the sky.

She drove down the two-lane blacktop as fast as she dared. The GPS system had been removed from the car after they bought it. Sandy pulled out a map and found the road they were on. A few miles later, he had Jennifer turn left, and they set out for the highway in the distance. They reached it without seeing another car, and drove down the entrance ramp.

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The little roadster no longer purred; it had been beaten, and drove as if it were injured.

Sandy tried to put his seatbelt on, but something was wrong with it. He held up the metal end, and found the Cosmonaut Lipstick had been hung by its hook through the hole. The heavy steel tube, once the size of a small flashlight, had been worn to a nub. He looked at his wife. "That's how you did it. This was what you were doing when you got into the car with him. Wasn't it?"

Jennifer nodded. "Did it work?"

Her belt had hung out the door as they drove off. The guy himself told her not to put it on. And the Cosmonaut Lipstick dragged along the pavement, leaving a thin red line. "I found, you didn't I?"

She smiled. "Maybe your dad knew what he was doing. No other lipstick would have lasted that long. It's that damn super-thick stuff that made the difference."

"Not much left of it, or of the tube. "

He jumped as a siren split the air behind them. A highway patrol car was right on their tail. Jennifer pulled over. A highway patrolman walked up on her side. "License and registration, ma'am."

She pulled it out and gave it to him. Sandy thought of the two guns under his seat, the license plate in the trunk. The burning car in the distant night.

The highway patrolman issued her a warning. Sandy had almost breathed a sigh of relief when the lawman leaned into the car and looked at him. "Haven't I seen you before? Weren't you driving a different car?" Then he nodded his head. "Yeah. You were getting a tire fixed."

It was the driver of the second highway patrol car. The guy who pulled in just before the other patrolman left the gas station.

"You're right, Officer. That was my brother's car. It finally died on me. My wife came out and picked me up in our car."

The patrolman looked at him. Sandy wondered if it had been long enough for the story to make sense, but he didn't dare look at his watch. The patrolman asked, "Can I see some ID, sir?"

Sandy took out his driver's license and handed it over.

The patrolman stepped back. He read the license with his flashlight, then looked at the car. Sandy wondered if he could see all the dents and the dust in the dark, with only the backwash from his headlights. And then he saw the patrolman shine his flashlight over the outside of the car. Finally, the man nodded and handed the license back. "Okay. Drive safely." He walked back to his patrol car.

Jennifer looked at him, fear in her eyes.

"No way," he told her as if she had asked a question. "When the cops find that burned-out car with the bodies, they'll get us. We might have made it: Nobody saw my ID; I paid for everything in cash. But now, this guy'll compare notes with the other cop I dealt with. That other one ran the plates on the Crown Victoria; this guy ran your license and our plate. Plus he saw my license. They'll put two and two together. They'll know I was lying, and as soon as they look deeper—"

"They'll know who you are."

He nodded. "The feds will think they've got me. Haul me in on a serial murder charge—and you too, since you were driving the getaway car. I either sing, or we go down."

"They'll kill you. They'd never let you live."

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Sandy nodded. "The mob would get to me. Dad has a lot of power, but not that much. We have to do a Sailor Joe."

Her eyes snapped to his. "You thought they'd kill Sailor Joe."

"But they didn't. Remember? I told you, I took that delivery to him. He's in the Caymans; doing fine. Whole new identity and everything."

He shrugged his shoulders. "I'm on the periphery, you know? I don't really know what these guys do. I'm just the schmuck who went to work for his dad as an IT manager."

He shook his head and his voice soured. "Here I thought my dad was a spy, that I was working for the CIA or something. Couldn't believe it when I realized it was the mob. Now I'm the computer geek who set up their whole system."

Jennifer heard the pain, the loss of innocence remembered too clearly. They had been married for barely six months the night he came home and locked himself in his office with a bottle of Scotch. When he finally let her in, the bottle was still full. After he told her, she understood. She felt the same way. Wanted a stiff drink, but knew she wouldn't be able to keep it down.

They talked long into the night, discussed what it meant for their lives, how everything had changed. They decided they couldn't have children, couldn't bring kids into such a household—especially when they might be used as leverage against their parents some day.

Sitting in the SL550, she looked at him. "Are you sure Sailor Joe's still alive?"

"Yeah. I don't understand these guys. Not really. But one thing I know; when they decide to kill someone, they don't waste time. They do it right away. If Sailor Joe was alive when I saw him, then he's still alive. Besides, as long as we aren't where the cops can reach us, my dad can protect us."

She didn't ask about money. She knew about the four million in offshore numbered accounts. She looked into his eyes. "Okay. How do we do it?"

He leaned over and kissed her. They sat there, on the side of the road, clutching each other's hands. "What we do is, you drive, while I call Big Mike."

Jennifer nodded. Big Mike was the number-two man in Arizona, second only to Sandy's father. As she drove, he spoke to Big Mike on the mobile phone in the car. It had a special system that scrambled the call. After several minutes, he hung up.

"Big Mike says to come in. They'll be waiting for us in Phoenix. They're setting up the papers we need if we have to run. Meanwhile, they're sending a crew out to find the Crown Vic. If they get there before the cops, they'll clean it up and we're covered. If they're too late, we're out."

He waited a beat, then: "You know, if the cops get there first, and we go to the Caymans or wherever . . . Well, after a few months, we'll know we really are safe. And since we won't have to worry about someone trying to use kids to get to us . . ."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Really."

They drove for a while, headlights splitting the dark night before them.

"You know, Sandy, I'm really scared. And I know it's crazy, but I hope Big Mike's crew gets there too late."

He put one hand over hers on the wheel. He felt the surging power of the car, but now he also felt how the vibration had changed from the long drive over that dirt road. "So do I, honey. So do I." ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

DIRECTION FROM THE GRAVE

by Richard Macker

Translated from the Norwegian by Runar Fergus.

Richard Macker is the English pseudonym of Norwegian writer Reider Thomassen. The author is especially noted in his native country for his crime short stories. A new volume of seven long Thomassen stories is in the works in Norway, and another story was recently included in a German anthology of works by Europe's leading crime writers. This is the fifth Richard Macker tale for *EQMM*.

The lengthy, delicious meal had turned Carl Vinger's face red and his eyes glassy. He set down his glass of wine, smiled jovially and said: "Dear children, to come straight to the point, I have invited you here to Carlsbo to inform you that I was murdered. I also intend to reveal which one of you it was who committed the deed."

"But, what on earth?"

The exclamation emerged from Bente Vinger Dale, a middle-aged, well-dressed woman with sharp features and artfully coiffured hair. She was joined at the table by her half-brothers Arild and Joachim Vinger. The three of them had the same father, but different mothers. During the course of his long life as an actor and film director, Carl Vinger had been fond of the opposite sex.

"Murdered! The old bird always had a taste for the absurd."

Joachim Vinger leaned his head back and gave a dry laugh. He was five years his half-sister's junior, slim and rather long-haired. There was an air of chic about both his unkempt clothing and his narrow, unshaven face.

"Be quiet, I would like to hear what Father has to say."

Arild Vinger spoke with authority. He was the oldest of the three children, and with his reddish face and square body, he was the one who most resembled their father.

Carl Vinger had lit a cigar. "I see you're shocked," he said. "And that isn't too surprising. I don't suppose any of you had expected to see me again. Well, here I am again, and I know that one of you has murdered me. There is of course the possibility that two of you conspired, or even all three, for that matter. But I have chosen to believe that two of you are innocent. Call it black optimism if you wish, because the certainty that I was murdered by one of my own children turned my mind as dark as the depths of night, even though I have been sitting here acting cheerful and unruffled."

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Bente Vinger Dale pushed her chair back and was about to rise.

"I can't stand this. I've got to get out of here now!"

Arild Vinger grabbed her arm and pulled her into her chair.

"Sit down. You have to go through with this too, you know that."

Carl Vinger inhaled his cigar deeply before blowing out the smoke in a thin stream. Then he proceeded: "During the past three to four years I have been the subject of attempted murder at least eight times. Initially I obviously had no idea that someone was trying to kill me. After all, the accidents were quite convincing. Once, my row boat capsized on the lake here at Carlsbo as a speedboat whizzed past. Another time, I fell down the stairs here in the house. It was as though I tripped on an invisible wire. A third time, I was almost crushed between a wall and a reversing car. I just managed to get out of the way at the last moment. That was when I came to the abominable realization that someone was out to get me. And when I almost succumbed to fire in my hunting cabin in the mountains, I really began to fear for my life. But I didn't alert the police. Instead, my suspicions fell upon you. I am a rich man, and you are my heirs. It didn't seem likely that anyone else would want to kill an old fogey like me. Anyway, about a month after the fire, shots were fired at my office window and I knew my life was in constant danger. However, I had no way of knowing what kind of accidents would befall me and I was once foolhardy enough to take a bite from a box of chocolates that a 'young admirer' had bestowed upon me. It almost cost me my life. More attempts were to follow, but I had luck on my side, at least until the murderer finally got the better of me. I'm dead now. How I died, I don't know. I only know that it wasn't from natural causes, because I was in perfect health. My doctor had told me so recently, although it didn't help me in the end. One of you finally got me. It's a terrible situation, and the two innocent ones among you can probably understand why I had a quiet funeral. Now you have come to Carlsbo, full of anticipation as to what my dear and loyal attorney Einar Graff will reveal in my will. Well, a murderer will have to be unmasked before my will is read out. You may now leave the table. I'm sure you will have plenty to talk about. We'll meet again at the coffee table in the drawing room at six o'clock sharp."

"I can see that Father meant it as a sick joke, but I still think it's unbearable and horrid. I can't believe we're having to go through with this."

Bente Vinger Dale dried the corners of her eyes with a pink handkerchief. Arild Vinger stared at her with an inscrutable demeanor. Then he shot an accusing stare at a blond, slender man at the foot of the table. "Listen here, Graff, what is this show you're putting on here? Don't the mourners have a right to be spared this psychological torture?"

The attorney shrugged calmly. "I'm sorry, I'm merely fulfilling the will of the deceased. And I shall do it to the best of my ability. The next video will be screened in the drawing room at precisely six o'clock."

He walked to the far end of the dining table where a video monitor was positioned on a tea table. He rolled it across the parquet and into the drawing room while the three dinner guests followed him with their eyes. It was quiet for a while. Then Joachim Vinger's dry laughter broke the silence.

"This is the most insane experience I have ever had. Father has outdone himself this time. You remember how bizarre and eccentric he could be, that's why he was such a great director. And now we are witnessing his final performance. I must

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say I can only see it as a burlesque comedy, and I intend to enjoy it to the end."

His half-sister gave him a sharp look and furrowed her forehead at him. "But what if it isn't a joke? What if one of us actually murdered him?"

"One of us? Who would that be? You, maybe?"

Arild Vinger spat out the words. She didn't get the chance to respond before the kitchen door opened and an elderly, plump woman with white hair entered.

"So, was the food to your liking?" she asked.

"Of course, Edna, delicious," replied Joachim Vinger. "Now I understand even better why Father kept you at Carlsbo for all these years."

The housekeeper nodded, but she didn't smile. She started to clear the dining table. The three guests entered the drawing room and took their seats on the settee next to one of the panorama windows. Joachim Vinger spoke:

"Imagine the perfect direction. Father allowed himself to be filmed while eating one of his favourite meals: turtle soup, lamb chops, and vanilla ice cream with strawberries. Then we are served the exact same meal while the recording is played. I think it's a safe bet that there will be marzipan cake and cloudberry liqueur with the coffee."

Arild Vinger stared through the picture window, towards the green lawns, the beautiful trees, and the colourful, well-kept flower beds. A hundred yards farther down was the lake with its jetty, its boats, and an idyllic small beach.

Joachim Vinger considered his half-brother for a moment. Then he spoke:

"This place is worth its four million and then some. What do you think?"

Arild Vinger started, and turned redder in the face. "Don't speak of money now."

"Why not? Have we not all come here to hear the content of the will? Don't try to pretend that you're not interested in what we are inheriting. I have read about the unfortunate bankruptcy of that fashionable restaurant you ran back in the capital. The inheritance won't do you any harm, will it?"

Arild Vinger threw back his head, annoyed. "I'll manage, Joachim. Unlike you, I've worked for a long time. You're still a 'student' and a playboy. Tell me, how many women are currently funding your life of leisure on the Riviera?"

Joachim put on an unruffled smile. "You have quite the wrong impression of me, big brother. I've supported myself as an advertising and stage artist for many years, and supported myself well from it."

"Please, let's not argue," Bente Vinger Dale said. "You have no idea how this affects me, especially in these circumstances."

She had the handkerchief in the corner of her eye once more. Joachim Vinger gave her a sly glance.

"Pardon me for saying so, Bente, but now you resemble the hysterical woman you portrayed in your latest role. You haven't had any offers after that disaster, have you?"

A hard look came into Bente Vinger Dale's heavily made-up blue-grey eyes. She leaned back on the sofa, lit a cigarette, and calmly studied her younger half-brother.

"One thing I know, my dear Joachim, is that I am a far better actor than you are an artist."

"Let's stop this bickering," Arild Vinger said with authority. "Let us agree how we should handle Father's rather original idea. We view it as an elaborate and macabre joke, but we don't know if he meant it seriously. He always was a bit of an original, and that's probably why he did so well at directing. But as you

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know, a person's characteristic traits get more intense as they get older. It's no secret that Father was quite a strange character in his last years. He wouldn't leave his profession, and he had the means to produce any film he wanted, one of which we have seen today. I propose that we view it as a curiosity. None of us really got to know him well because he was always so busy creating. This may have made him bitter, and it may be that he became paranoid lately. None of us were told that he was dead until this Graff character sent us copies of the obituary about a month ago. The funeral was a quiet affair, as we all know. But now Graff has summoned us for this meeting, and in one way we have met Father again. And he has honoured us, despite the deranged allegations. Personally, I have never wanted him dead, and I can't even in my wildest dreams imagine that any of you have, either."

"My sentiments exactly," commented Bente Vinger Dale.

"Mine too," said Joachim Vinger. "We loved him and were proud of him, all of us, and it's a tragedy that we were never to have the opportunity to get to know him better. But now we are here as heirs. At least two-thirds of our father's assets are due to us. He may have been of the opinion that none of us made much of ourselves. Maybe he was so disappointed in us that he felt the need to torment us with this display. Let us just watch it without becoming too excited. Let us view it as his final piece of art, in the certainty that none of us could kill their own father."

"Now you're talking like a grown-up Joachim, it suits you," said Bente Vinger Dale.

The housekeeper entered and motioned towards the table set next to the large fireplace, where the fire was consuming dry birch logs.

"Please be seated, it is served."

Carl Vinger seemed rested and relaxed, and he took a generous helping of the marzipan cake. At regular intervals he raised his glass of cloudberry liqueur for a toast. To start off he had talked about everything and nothing, but suddenly his face darkened and eyes sharpened.

"Dear children. I'm convinced you had a heartfelt and fulfilling conversation after dinner. And I'm just as sure that the one of you who killed me in no way let this be known. Well, I'm not surprised. But allow me to draw your attention to the beautiful object at the centre of the table. I'm sure you can guess what it is."

The three heirs focused on the elegant bluish-white metal container positioned between two flower arrangements.

"Oh my God, it . . . it's the urn," said Bente Vinger Dale with a shaking voice. "This is . . . this is more than I can take."

"The urn indeed," echoed Carl Vinger. "With my mortal remains. As you know, my final place of rest shall be here at Carlsbo."

Arild Vinger's face was increasingly crimson and his eyes were glazed. Joachim Vinger's forehead perspired. "This joke has gone too far," he mumbled, and stared at the others with wandering, distant eyes.

"And now," said Carl Vinger, "it's time for you to know how I died. Graff, you do the honours."

The attorney, who was also seated at the coffee table, extracted a sheet of paper from a file and started to read:

"The deceased was found on the twenty-sixth of July, nineteen eighty-nine,

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floating in the lake just off the jetty on his own property of Carlsbo. The cause of death was drowning. The corpse had lesions in the forehead area of the cranium. It would seem that an accident had occurred, that the deceased had dived from the jetty into shallow water with a rocky bottom. The injury to the head was not in itself deadly, but rather the reason for a loss of consciousness and subsequent drowning."

Graff replaced the sheet in the file and stared towards the screen. Carl Vinger sat still for a while. "I see. That was how I died. And don't believe for a moment that the causes were natural. If this were the case, you would not be held responsible. But now I wish to show you some authentic photographs of the last phase of the tragedy. And if you wonder how and why these scenes were photographed, I can inform you that I had a standing agreement with one of my best and most trusted cameramen of many years. If anything should happen to me, he was to be told immediately so that he could capture the necessary footage. That was the agreement, now let's look at the result."

An unfamiliar voice commented on the subsequent images. The first displayed the Carlsbo property from a distance. Then there were closeups of several people on the beach. New closeups showed Carl Vinger, dressed only in his bathing suit, lying on a stretcher with a deathly pale face, tousled grey hair, and a nasty crimson wound on his wide forehead.

"Dearest, kindly Father." Bente Vinger Dale's voice was girlish and verging on tears. She snuffled and buried her face in her hands. Arild Vinger held his hand before his mouth and swallowed, as if he were about to throw up. Joachim Vinger had turned ashen and suddenly appeared to be ten years older.

"No," he mumbled. "It isn't possible."

His half-brother eyed him sceptically. "What isn't possible?"

"That he died a natural death. He *never* used to dive. Don't you remember that?"

Carl Vinger broke the charged silence. "Now is the time for the guilty party to confess. If that doesn't happen, Graff will present the case to the police for a full investigation. All previous attempts on my life will be fully exposed. I can assure you that Graff is a tenacious character who will take care of my interests. You will all face a most unpleasant time. You will be in the public eye, and the guilty one amongst you will be punished in accordance with the law. A confession here and now will prevent this. The guilty one will not be punished, but will be disinherited. As you may have guessed, there are several versions of my will. The one that will apply obviously depends on who killed me."

Carl Vinger leaned back and lit a cigar. Silence reigned for a long while. Arild Vinger finally broke it. He spoke quietly and intensely.

"Tell me, Graff, what legal authority do you have to go through with all this?"

The attorney didn't flinch. "As I have already mentioned, I am following the will of the deceased in every respect."

"And how many films will we be forced to watch before this macabre show is over?"

Graff motioned to a row of numbered videotapes in a rack in front of him.

"That all depends on you. There are numerous options. Carl Vinger was a particularly prescient and visionary man."

"He was indeed," agreed Arild Vinger. "But none of us three killed him. The whole display is a terrible affront to his children and heirs. We will not stand it a second longer. We shall . . ."

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He stopped mid sentence and turned towards the door to the dining room, shock registering on his flushed face. The others heard the same thing he did—a loud, rolling laughter that streamed towards them through the walls and door. Then a voice cried: "Here I am, children!"

Joachim Vinger had stood up. The legs carrying his stooped body were shaking. "Did you hear that?" he mumbled. "It's Father!"

Suddenly he raced forward and tore open the door to the dining room. Arild Vinger was hot on his heels, panting with excitement. "I knew it," he managed to utter. "Father isn't dead, he only put on this show to fool us."

"Of course," Joachim Vinger whispered. "We should have guessed it. Thank God, the old bird is alive." He slapped his half-brother on the back, and for the first time they smiled at one another, joy all over their faces. Then they gazed around the dining room, but there was no one to be seen.

"Where are you, Father?" cried Joachim Vinger.

Arild Vinger pointed towards a large cupboard in a corner. "Over there!"

A few seconds later the cupboard was open, and they stared inside with expressions that slowly changed from anticipation to disappointment and frustration.

"It . . . it's a tape recorder," Joachim Vinger said tonelessly. "God help me, I can't take much more of this."

Attorney Graff was just behind them, and spoke gently. "Please, come back to the drawing room. The show is almost over."

By the coffee table next to the flickering fireplace sat Bente Vinger Dale, white in the face. Graff inserted another tape into the video player. A few seconds later, Carl Vinger's face was back on the screen, this time looking aged, dark, and full of repressed sorrow and bitterness. "So now we know. You murdered me, Bente. And now you have given yourself away. You were the only one who knew I was dead. Where was the joy in your face when you heard me in the dining room? No, there was none. Only shock and anxiety. Because you knew the game was up. However, you are my daughter, and blood is thicker than water. So I'll keep my word. You shall leave Carlsbo a free woman. But not before you have signed papers confirming that you waive any claims to your share of the inheritance. 'For special reasons,' as Graff so succinctly has put it. But this is my final offer. You must sign the papers within five minutes. Otherwise the matter will be in the hands of the police. The choice is yours."

Carl Vinger drew on his cigar. Suddenly his large, staring eyes filled the screen. Bente Vinger Dale held her hand before her face, as if to shield herself. Then she suddenly got up, looked at Graff for a moment, and bent over and signed the paper he was presenting. Then she hurried out of the room without looking back.

The half-brothers sat staring into space, as if they still hadn't comprehended what had happened. Graff inserted another tape into the player, and Carl Vinger once again appeared on the screen. "Dear Arild and Joachim," he said in a friendly tone. "I'm sorry I had to put you through all this. But before I leave you for good, I would like to share a toast of champagne with you. Edna, you may serve us now."

The housekeeper appeared with a bottle and two glasses on a silver tray. She poured and retreated. Carl Vinger raised his glass. The half-brothers followed suit, respectfully and bleary-eyed.

"Cheers, my boys. May good fortune follow you for the rest of your lives." The old man emptied the contents of the glass. Then he put it down. The sharp colour image turned to a blue flicker and disappeared. ●

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TAKE DEATH EASY

by Peter Turnbull

Peter Turnbull's latest novel in the Hennessey and Yellich series to which this new story belongs is *Turning Point* (September 2008, Severn House). The series is set in Yorkshire, the author's home turf, and always rewards the reader with the believability of both place and characters. Mr. Turnbull was a social worker before he began to write full time and in the course of his duties no doubt witnessed many of the same things a policeman encounters. †

1.

MONDAY

—In which in the sultry month of August in the golden Vale of York, a loathsome man with a loathsome machine makes a loathsome find, and a woman fulfilled becomes a woman haunted.

His new toy, she thought, said it all. And it said the end—after ten years it was the end, as, eventually, she knew it would be. No more hiding from it, or from him. It astounded Sandra Schofield that it had taken her ten years to "see" her husband, to see that she had been worshipping a myth. They had met at university, both students of English literature. She had immersed herself in her course, entered into the spirit of it, had obtained a great enrichment from it, and had been awarded a lower second. She could have got a 2.1, her tutor said, but her old problem of tending to write unfinished sentences had been her downfall, so a 2.2 it had to be. Gary Schofield, who liked being called "Gaz," as he had been in primary school, also on the same course, had been awarded a First. She assumed that he had had the same attitude to the course as she, and whilst she had taken a modest 2.2, he on the other hand had taken an impressive First, and you don't get better than that. She could only respect him. She respected him further when with his First he went to teach in an inner-city school, while she had gone to teach in a traditional genteel girls' grammar school where the pupils want to learn and school discipline is not an issue. The truth emerged slowly, and two children and ten years later it was inescapable. It emerged because of a comment here, an attitude there, and its emergence was hindered by her initial refusal to believe what she was hearing.

It was, for example, his boast, *his boast,* that their second-year Shakespeare paper consisted of questions on either *King Lear* or *Julius Caesar,* and that *Lear* being a minefield when it came to examinations, and *Caesar* being a simple play by comparison, he had gone in knowing nothing at all about *Lear,* had not even read *Lear* that year, but had depended solely on his knowledge of *Caesar,* of which he knew so much. She, on the other hand, had familiarised herself with both plays, read both, read all the critics on both. She had taken the lesser degree. And that's how he had done it: examination technique, not, as she had thought, academic brilliance. Not cheating, by any means, but there was some-

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thing cynical and exploitative about it. When she realised that, Sandra Schofield realised that, after all, her husband just would not thrill to three words, or even three lines of Shakespeare. And the throwaway remark by which she learned why he had taken a job in the inner-city school: Inner-city schools are not expected to produce good results anyway, so there's less pressure on the teaching staff. So while she stayed up until midnight marking the homework of her pupils who were going to become doctors and lawyers, he spent the evening in front of the television or in the pub in the village, because inner-city children don't do homework. Set as much homework as you like, it won't get done. After ten years settled in the harsh north of England out of devotion to her new husband who would not leave Yorkshire, she realised that her husband was a lazy, cynical, self-centred, emotionally immature individual. She grew to find him loathsome. And his new toy said it all.

A metal detector.

She had always found such devices loathsome. Men walking across fields, sweeping the thing from side to side before them; scavenging. If they were birds, they'd be vultures. And here he was still wanting to be called "Gaz" as he had been when six years old, tearing off the wrapping of his new toy, with six weeks of uninterrupted school holidays to play with it in. And while his wife and children wanted attention, and despite his complaining about the tightness of the household budget, he'd flashed his credit card and indulged himself. It was then that Sandra Schofield "saw" her husband, and when she did, her home in Dorset beckoned, and beckoned warmly.

Gary "Gaz" Schofield, insensitive to his wife's coldness, to her ever increasing emotional distance, not even noticing that she was rummaging in the cupboard where their suitcases were kept, announced that he was going out for the day, but he'd be back for dinner. Without waiting for her reply, he left the house, metal detector, instruction manual, and small spade in hand, and walked to where his gleaming car stood in the driveway.

He drove to the countryside east of York, to the area of Roman roads and ancient settlements. It was a hot day, flat fields of golden corn or yellow oilseed lay about him, a distant horizon, a vast blue sky. He drove off the main road onto a "B" road, and from the B road he turned up an unmarked track on which he parked the car. From the track he walked up a path to a small wood, one of many small woods which serve to break up the landscape in the Vale of York. As he approached the wood, detector in hand, he saw a sign nailed to a tree at the edge of the wood: Private Wood—Keep Out. He smiled. That sign, he thought, would serve to keep many people out and so with luck, he'd be the first metal-detector owner to use his device in this location.

He stepped into the shade of the wood, in which many flies swarmed, and saw that the wood with its smooth mossy floor leant itself well to detecting. He put on the headphones, switched on the machine, and began to crisscross the wood, sweeping the machine widely before him. At first he found nothing, but he kept on sweeping because like all who pursue the hobby, he knew that the next sweep could bring about the earthenware pot of coins that had been buried in order to prevent the Romans from looting them, or another such similar discovery: such discoveries being made from time to time in the soil of England.

Then his headphones buzzed. He took them off and laid down the detector, and began to dig with the small spade. About a foot down he came across a metal torch, about twenty years old. He went down further and came across a ruck-

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sack, also of a design which he recalled being popular about twenty years ago—a Terylene sack, still red in colour, on an aluminum frame. Digging further, he struck a hard object, but not metal. He scraped the soil away. He saw it was a skull.

A human skull.

Harriet Cooper was a tortured woman. A haunted, tortured woman, and she knew the torture now would be endless. She would take it to her grave. If she had been by herself she would have gone to the police and confessed, but she had a husband to consider, a man of standing, the scandal would ruin him and he knew nothing of what had happened all those years earlier, before they had met. And she had pre-teenage children, both settled in school, both wanting to become doctors like their father.

The memory, when it returned, came in pieces. It came suddenly, the first bit, while sewing a patch on her son's jeans: the night in the wood, the hole, the smell of freshly turned soil, the scent of summer vegetation, sharpened because of the recent shower of rain . . . then all she could do was sit there, wondering whether she had remembered a dream. Two days later she had accepted that it was no dream, but that she really had once helped to bury a body.

And the body was that of Norbert Parkes. Poor Norbert, little Norbert, university life for him was not a good experience, just another rejection in a life which had been a series of rejections . . . then two days later, the memory of the murder itself. Miles swinging the pickax handle down on Norbert's head from behind . . . and the sound of a woman screaming, then realising that she had been the only woman present. And what was it that Miles had said as he looked down on the body . . . what was it? Oh yes, "Take death easy, Norbert, take death easy."

If at the moment either she or Cameron had picked up the phone, and called the police, it would have been all right, not for Norbert, not for Miles, but for them, her and Cameron, because they had no idea what Miles was going to do—even Miles didn't seem to premeditate it. That's what it seemed like. Miles just couldn't contain his contempt for Norbert any longer, and then Norbert's head had been sticking up above the back of the chair and Miles just happened to be walking past with a pickax handle in his hand. . . . Everything conspired at once to make Norbert's head an irresistible target.

But Miles had a way of controlling people, and before she knew what she was doing, she was helping Miles and Cameron bundle Norbert's little body into the back of Cameron's old Land Rover to carry it to where Miles knew was a private wood. And there they buried him, possessions and all—cheap, inexpensive possessions. Then they had returned to Miles's parents' house and collected the rest of Norbert's possessions, his bus ticket, his cheap sleeping bag, the small pile of coins on the bedside cabinet. And when they had finished, Norbert Parkes had never been in the house.

The very next day Miles's parents had returned from their holiday in Jamaica and thanked Miles and his two university friends for "sitting" the house for them, and hoped that the "three of you" had had a pleasant two weeks in "our house." After lunch that day, she and Cameron had driven back to York in total silence. At York Station she had gotten out of the Land Rover without a word being spoken or without a backward glance. And that had been the last she had seen of Cameron McKay or Miles Trewlawney.

She and Miles and Cameron, all now in their early forties. She, until she recov-

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ered the memory, had been a fulfilled and privileged woman, and all three had remained in the Vale. McKay Electronics was Cameron's contribution to the micro-technology boom, and Trewlawney, Wells, and Isles was a feared firm of solicitors, and had acted for one of her husband's patients when he had tried, unsuccessfully, to sue for medical negligence. The headed notepaper described Miles Trewlawney as one of the "senior partners."

She began to return to the wood. When they had left the wood that day dawn had broken and they had sat, the three of them, side by side in a stunned silence, in Cameron's Land Rover. She remembered the journey back to the Trewlawney house, white-painted, standing in its own grounds, and so twenty years later, she had little difficulty retracing the route to the vicinity of the wood. The next step was to visit each small wood and copse in the location until she found one marked Private Wood—Keep Out which she found with ease. In the wood she located the spot where Norbert had been buried. She began to revisit the wood, near twice weekly, drawn by some horrific fascination, drawn as she had read all murderers are to the scene of their crime, over and over again. But that Monday, blisteringly hot, the first Monday in August, the wood was different. Not standing in isolation as usual, with no activity about it, it had now become a focus of much activity.

Police activity.

Harriet Cooper drove on, but she knew that from that moment her life was effectively over.

2.

—In which Chief Inspector Hennessey takes charge.

George Hennessey woke with the sun, as he found he often did, early rising in the summer, rising on time but with difficulty in the deep midwinter. He dressed, went downstairs, breakfasted, let Oscar romp in the rear garden of his house. He propped the main back door open but locked the grille with its dog flap so that Oscar could come and go as he pleased during the day. He drove from Thirsk across flat country to York, to Micklegate Bar Police Station, and was at his desk by 8:30 A.M. He had then driven to Northallerton and the headquarters of the North Yorkshire Police to attend the monthly chief-inspector meeting. He returned to York for lunch to be informed that Sergeant Yellich required his attendance at a location to the east of the city. "Body discovered, sir," the uniformed officer said. "Shallow-grave job, I believe." Hennessey forwent lunch.

"Gentleman here found it, skipper." Yellich indicated Schofield, who stood with his metal detector, looking pleased with himself "Or rather his metal detector did."

Hennessey glanced at the screen, which encircled a small area of the wood. "Who's here?"

"Dr. D'Acre, skipper."

Hennessey nodded and walked to the screen, opened the flap, and stepped inside. Louise D'Acre, slender, short hair, slightly greying, knelt over the body in the shallow grave, by now completely uncovered. She glanced up at Hennessey and then she looked down at the body again. "Young male," she said, "early twenties, short and slight of build, distinctive red hair, there's a few strands remaining. He sustained a massive blow to the back of the head. That would have killed him, if we assume he wasn't already dead."

"Already dead?"

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"Well, we can't rule out the possibility yet that he was poisoned or strangled or suffocated, and the blow to the head was just to make sure. Or if he had been suffocated his body might have been dropped headfirst from a high place to make it look as though he fell to his death, but I doubt that will prove to be the case." She stood and peeled off her latex gloves. "No point in burying him then, is there?"

"Point taken."

"There were some possessions buried with him."

"Were there indeed?"

"Beyond the screen."

Hennessey stepped out from the screen to where Yellich stood. "Items found with the body?"

"Here, skipper."

Yellich bent down and picked up a production bag. One rucksack, a few things from its pockets, one of which—he delved into the bag and brought out a small clearer bag of cellophane—had contained an ID card. "Norbert Parkes, a member of the National Union of Students, least he was twenty years ago. University of York." He handed the cellophane sachet to Hennessey, who pondered the photograph. A thin-faced youth with striking red hair, the ID card clearly having been preserved by the thick plastic wallet it was held in, and the Terylene of the rucksack, and twelve inches of soil to keep out the sun's rays and the frost's damage.

"Get on to the university, please, Yellich, get an address of one of their students of twenty years past . . . you know the name."

"He's in a meeting."

"Tell him it's personal and urgent."

The phone line clicked and the "Blue Danube Waltz" played, reached the end of the tune, then started again.

"McKay!" The voice was angry, ill-tempered.

"It's Harriet Cooper."

"I don't know a Harriet Cooper. I'm in an important meeting, I have to get back to it."

"Harriet . . . 'Hat' . . . 'Hat' Sewell."

A pause.

"Hat . . ."

"Cameron, they've found Norbert's body."

A sigh. A longer pause.

"Cameron . . ."

"Yes, I'm still here. We've got to meet."

"Yes."

"I'll phone Miles."

"Are you still in touch with him?"

"No. Not since that day."

"I only recently remembered doing it."

"I never forgot it, not a single day goes by . . . but . . . When is a good time to phone?"

"Midafternoon but not at weekends. My husband's a doctor, this will ruin him. I've got two children at school."

"I've got a business worth three million pounds which will sink if I don't stay at the helm. And three children. And a wife."

"What are we going to do? But we owe Norbert. We owe his family."

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"Nothing. Do nothing. If in doubt, do nothing. I'll phone you at home. You'd better let me have your number."

The university registrar provided the police with Norbert Parkes's address as recorded by them. It was in Bridlington. Hennessey and Yellich drove there. The address proved to be on small-hotel land, near the beach, tall, thin terraced houses with names like "Seaview," "Holmlea," and "Morevilla." Many had No Vacancies signs in the window, attesting to the busy August period, when the coal mines and steelworks in the industrial north close for two or three weeks, the "stop weeks" for maintenance when the steel workers and miners take their families to "Brid" for a fortnight and stay at "Seaview" or "Holmlea" or "Morevilla": bed, breakfast, and evening meal.

The address provided by the university, specifically, was 147, Cannaby Terrace. Hennessey and Yellich parked their car as close as they could and then walked to 147, along the terrace, savouring the sea air, the smell of fish, and the glimpse of the blue North Sea, upon which, a long way out, a white ship sailed northwards. 147 was called "Sandene" and had cockleshells cemented to the stone gateposts and also a No Vacancies sign in the window. Hennessey and Yellich stepped up to the front door and rang the bell. Half an hour later the worst was over.

"They wouldn't sell the hotel in case Norbert returned." Thomas Parkes, a heavily jowled man, remained to speak to Hennessey and Yellich after Mrs. Parkes had left the house tearfully to go to their church to light a candle, and Mr. Parkes had excused himself to be by himself for a while. "They retired about ten years ago. Their living room is in the basement, their bedroom is in the attic, the middle bit of the house was the guests' area, all gone a bit musty now as you see."

"What did you know of your brother's last movements?"

"Movements or moments?"

"Movements."

"Pleased you said that." Thomas Parkes forced a smile. "Because of his last moments, I know nothing. I don't want to know anything. But at least now the waiting is over. Now we bury him. Say goodbye properly. Last time I saw Norbert he was off to visit some university friends. He'd just graduated, not a good class of degree, but he could use it and said that he'd been invited to help sit a house."

"Sit a house?"

"As in babysitting. Live in a house while the occupants are away so as to keep the property occupied to deter burglars."

"I see. You don't know where that was or whose house?"

"I don't. Norbert only had one friend at university. It wasn't a good experience for him. He was out of his depth, intellectually and socially. Didn't get acceptance, always a bit of a hanger-on."

"You saw that?"

"No . . . just things he said. Messages he gave out. When he visited home he always caught the last train back. Sometimes he managed to miss that and had an extra night at home . . . messages like that. I went to teacher training college, less taxing, not as pukka. . . . I got on better for that. Norbert would have been better going to a teacher training college, more his level. Less of a bad experience for him. He came away using an expression . . . 'take life easy' . . . which irritated me."

"It would irritate me too." Hennessey glanced out of the grimy window which looked out to the rear of the house and to the backs of the houses which lined

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the next street.

"He had no confidence. Ask him what he was going to do with his degree and he'd say he was going to 'take life easy for a while.' He allowed it to enter his thinking and it was an excuse for doing nothing. He was like a hippie from the 1960s but without the culture: 'laid back' all by himself, but it was a reaction to a lack of confidence. So the body, it's definitely Norbert?"

"More than likely. Your description fits the description given by the pathologist, Dr. D'Acre, of the body as it would have been in life. The N.U.S. ID card was found in the rucksack."

"I remember his rucksack, a red one."

"Sounds like it is he. The dental check will confirm it. You'll be able to let us have the name of Norbert's dentist?"

"Mr. Vere, Station Terrace, Bridlington."

Yellich wrote the name and address in his notebook.

"And Norbert's friend?"

"Fella called Joe. Joe Patterson. I have Norbert's address book upstairs, if that would help you."

"Ideal." Hennessey smiled. "Ideal."

3.

—In which a man of the cloth provides three names and the police decide to rattle a cage or two.

The only "Joe" in the address book was deemed to be Joseph Patterson. The phone number beside the name was twenty years old but was rung nonetheless. It proved to be the number of Joe's mother, who provided the police with "dear Joseph's" present address, in Harrogate. One hour later Hennessey and Yellich knocked on his door.

"Oh, Norbert." Joe Patterson had invited the police officers through the pleasant chaos of his house—wife, children, dog, cat, hamsters—to the sanctity and the tranquility of his study. "He didn't have an easy time of it. It's difficult to be accepted if you're not particularly bright, don't have a perceptible personality, don't come from the middle classes."

"Which was Norbert Parkes?"

"As you say." Patterson sat back, wearing his clerical collar and smooth-front, buttonless shirt. "He had nothing to offer, basically that was his problem—no image, no academic skills, no interest outside the course that he could talk about or that would give an aspect to himself. He wanted to belong, as we all do, but had nothing to offer as a means of gaining acceptance. So he became a bit of a hanger-on."

"Do you remember your social circle at the university?"

"Oh, like yesterday. Let me see. I suppose the leader of the group was Miles Trewlawney, came from a well-established legal family in the Vale of York. He had a real down on Norbert, gave him a hard time, resented people like Norbert attending the university. He was a real snob. I didn't take to him, but I did like 'Hat' Sewell, Harriet to give her her full name, and a Scots lad called Cameron McKay. I was accepted by them, and Norbert latched on to me. And we socialised together throughout the three years of the course, with Norbert 'taking life easy' all the time."

"That's an expression we've heard before today."

"It was Norbert's catch phrase. His excuse for not applying himself. He'd 'dropped

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out' without ever really having 'dropped in.' I don't know the full extent of his home circumstances, his growing up, but he wasn't equipped for life. The over-indulged younger son, perhaps? I don't know. But university was a shock when he found he wasn't the centre of attention and that he was expected to work for his grades. A bit 'disabled' in a sense. I suppose that's why I allowed him to latch on to me."

"The last time you saw him?"

"After graduation. The last time I heard of him, though, was when I was invited to help Miles house-sit his parents' house. He phoned me up and added with a snigger that Norbert would be there. I declined. I knew Miles Trewlawney, I knew his invitation to Norbert was only so as to show Norbert what he was missing in terms of quality of lifestyle and to have him there as the butt of all jokes and patronising comments. And I also thought I'd done enough for Norbert. That was the summer after graduation, twenty years ago. How time flies."

Driving back to York, Hennessey asked Yellich to prepare a press release, stating that the body discarded in the wood in the Vale of York "is believed to be that of Norbert Parkes, who disappeared, aged twenty-one years, twenty years ago."

"That," said Hennessey, "ought to rattle a cage."

"Or two," added Yellich, keeping his eyes on the road.

4.
TUESDAY

—In which three well-set, middle-class felons learn the meaning of Dame Agatha Christie's observation that "the past casts long shadows."

Harriet Cooper noted with distaste how overweight Miles Trewlawney had grown and was impressed with how youthful and slender Cameron McKay had remained, despite his wealth. They had arranged the meeting at short notice, a rapid ringing-round, a meeting place had been agreed as being the car park behind the Rising Sun, a pub they used to drive out to in their student days. The three had arrived within five minutes of each other. She in the modest Ford, her family's second car, Cameron McKay had a Mercedes Benz, and Miles, of course, had a Rolls Royce. They approached each other, nodding sheepishly. This was not the sort of joyful, hugging, hand-shaking reunion that they might have envisaged having when in their youth.

"It was on the mid-evening news last night," Harriet Cooper said.

"I heard it, too." Cameron McKay nodded. "Believed to be Norbert Parkes. It's only a matter of time before they confirm identity. I read they can match dental records because teeth don't decay, well, not like flesh. I mean that . . ."

"We know what you mean," Miles Trewlawney cut him off.

"We've got to go to the police." Harriet Cooper was urgent, agitated. "Make a clean breast of it."

"No." Trewlawney avoided eye contact. "There'll be no police."

"Thought you might say that, Miles." Cameron McKay glanced coldly at him. "You've more to lose than we have. And further from grace to fall, not only your position, but your family's hard-earned reputation in the Vale. What are you, third generation in the firm?"

"Fifth, actually. Well, fifth in the family. Third since we amalgamated with Wells and Isles and Co."

"Don't get off the point," Harriet Cooper snapped. "You're looking at life,

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Cameron, and I . . . much, much less . . . perverting the course of justice . . ."

"Accessory to murder." Trewlawney raised his eyebrows. "We're all looking at serious time."

"Accessory . . ." Cameron McKay's voice trailed off. "Are you sure?"

"I am a solicitor."

"You're also motivated to frighten us into silence."

"There's nothing to link us to the murder." Trewlawney spoke slowly. "Nothing. The police investigation will peter out. It has to, they're thinly stretched. In a few days' time there'll be another murder, much fresher, and the file on Norbert will be put in a drawer to gather dust. We're all about halfway through our life expectancy, we've kept quiet for twenty years, if we can keep quiet for another forty, we'll have got away with it."

"You see, that's the point, Miles." Harriet Cooper spoke in the way she only wished she could have spoken to Miles Trewlawney at the time. "I don't know whether I want to get away with it."

"Ah . . ." Trewlawney pulled his shoulders back. "Don't go soft on me, Harriet. Not after all this time."

"Actually, it's not after all this time, it's only a month ago, in a sense. I buried the memory, you see. It's very fresh for me. It belongs to yesterday."

"And your husband? And your children?"

"Do you think I haven't thought of them? But what about Norbert's family? They have a right to know what happened to their son."

The conversation fell away into silence as a young man walked past them to his car. Then Cameron McKay asked, "Did anyone know where Norbert was? Who else knows he was at the house at the time?"

"Well, he couldn't have told his parents because he didn't know the address."

"That's right," Cameron McKay said softly. "I remember I picked him up at York Station in my Land Rover. The 'Great Green Land Crab,' I called it."

There was a lull in the conversation, then Harriet Cooper said, "Joe Patterson, he knew. He phoned me and asked me if I was going to Miles's parents' house for a few days. I said I was. He said he was undecided but he probably wouldn't because he was tired of protecting Norbert."

"You've got a good memory," Trewlawney sneered.

"Like I said, for me it's like it happened yesterday."

"But it means Joe Patterson can put Norbert at Miles's house at the time he disappeared. It's all they need."

"No, that and a confession, perhaps. But that alone won't be enough to convict."

Trewlawney glared at Harriet Cooper. "So we stay silent. Understood?"

But driving home, Harriet Cooper thought Miles Trewlawney had intimidated her for far too long. And he hadn't seen the look of shock, horror, betrayal, that had flashed across Norbert's eyes the instant the pickax handle had struck the back of his head. She had. Nor had Miles Trewlawney seen the look of sneering contempt on his own face as he put every ounce of strength he could muster into delivering the blow. She had. She had seen that, too.

5.

—And finally, in which a woman reminds her children of Captain Lawrence Oates, George Hennessey tells his wife about his lover, and a man thinks a smug thought about his wife.

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The woman pondered whether to wait for her husband to come home, but she decided against it, the wrench would, she felt, be too much to bear. But she made an excellent lunch for her two delighted children and then went to speak to the daily help. She explained to the help that she had to go out, and asked her, in return for extra money, if she could wait in the house until her husband returned at about six P.M. so as to ensure the children were supervised by a responsible adult at all times, as the law requires. She then returned to the dining room and said, "I'm going out now. I may be some time."

To which Jonathan, eleven, her eldest, said, "You sound like Captain Oates."

The woman smiled, and said, "Mrs. January will stay in the house until Daddy gets home."

She took the bus into York. She indulged herself with a visit to the Minster, where she lit a candle, and walked the walls, savouring the city. Finally she fetched up at Micklegate Bar where once the head of Harry Hotspur had been impaled as a deterrent to any who would betray the Crown. At Micklegate Bar she saw the police station. She walked into the building and at the enquiry desk she said, "My name is Harriet Cooper. I'd like to give information about the murder of Norbert Parkes."

George Hennessey stood in the rear garden of his house, sipping a mug of tea, enjoying the late evening. The garden had been laid according to his wife's design when she had been pregnant with their first and only child. Three months after he was born she had died, suddenly, and her ashes had been scattered in "her" garden. He felt that she was still there, and he came out to say hello to her, to Jennifer, each day.

"So with her statement we wrapped it up." An observer would see a middle-aged man talking to himself. "We picked up the other two. Trewlawney held out, but when we showed him Harriet Cooper's statement and Cameron McKay's statement, he too confessed. For twenty years the secret had remained buried, then along came a bloke with a metal detector and it all crumbled, or fell into place, whichever way you look at it, inside forty-eight hours." He sipped his tea. "Jen, I'm going out tonight, staying out. We've found each other. It doesn't mean my feelings for you are diminished. But we both have our needs. I want you to be happy for us." When he said that he felt a warmth close about him that could not be explained by the last of the day's sun rays alone.

He packed an overnight bag and drove to the village of Skelton, north of York, a wealthy village, with a tenth-century church. He went to a half-timbered house. He rang the doorbell. Louise D'Acre opened it and smiled, hooking a hand round the back of his neck. "Come in, the children have gone up."

"That's her, that's her all over, all the time." Gary "Gaz" Schofield sat in the armchair getting hungry and he thought that that was her. Her old bugbear, unfinished sentences. He read the note: "I've taken the children." Of course she's taken the children, he could see that, did she think he was simple? But where had she taken them? The Railway Museum? The Coast? And when would they be back? He sat and watched the sun kiss the distant skyline. He thought it could be worse, some men have to put up with much worse. Sandra's inability to finish a sentence . . . when all was said and done, that could be lived with for the sake of peace. He switched on the television and waited for his wife and children to come home, wondering what excuse she'd offer for making him wait so long for his dinner. ●

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Getting Rid of the Body

by Tom Tolnay

"**Murder.** The unlawful killing of one human being by another, especially with malice aforethought." *That's it? Thirteen words to describe such a wicked deed?* Slapping the dictionary closed, I hoisted my body up from the desk and shuffled into the bedroom. Elise was lying just as I'd left her, naked to the hips, sprawled across the tangled sheets. I stood at the foot of the bed, admiring her exceptional womanhood, which was framed in a swath of light from the street lamp below: her flaming red hair scattered across the pillow like a mass of silken tassels, the deep indention of her waist, her shoulders glowing like beach sand at dusk. A blue heart pierced by an arrow had been tattooed midway between her bellybutton and the lower edge of her abdomen. The only defect in this picture of loveliness was the bruises which encircled her throat like a necklace of amethysts.

Minutes before, as she was sliding out of her bra, she'd started laughing over a remark made by a young attorney in her office, but something in the way his name—"Alexander"—had rolled off her tongue suggested that more than one-liners had passed between them. When I came right out and asked if anything I should know about was going on, Elise became so animated in her denial that I was convinced she'd already crawled on all fours across the other man's bed. Having always trusted my hunches, I cross-examined her obsessively—until she finally gave in:

"I think I'm in love with Alexander." She bowed her head in apology, retrieved her bra, and muttered, "I'd better go." The next thing I knew I was tightening the bra around her neck, and Elise, after letting out a single piercing scream, was choking and clawing the backs of my hands.

Now, that twist to her red-smeared mouth struck me as not contrite so much as smug, as if she'd managed to have the last laugh simply by leaving her body behind.

I sat down on the edge of the bed beside her freckle-specked legs. I was still finding fault with the dictionary's take on "Murder"—its matter-of-fact treatment of a word fecund with implication. Any adequate definition had to take the aftermath of that selfish act into account; it was, after all, the abrupt,

A writer with many mainstream stories in print, Tom Tolnay has also produced a small body of work in the mystery genre. His 1990 mystery novel *Celluloid Gangs* (Walker & Company) was recently optioned as a feature film property by Matinee Entertainment, and his most recent suspense novel, *This Is the Forest Primeval,* is due out later this year from Silk Label Books. His upcoming stories include a private-eye tale in *Hardboiled.* †

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unexpected end of an individual's journey through life: Never again would Elise brush her hair and apply bright lipstick before heading out to her office, where she booked travel and hotel reservations for a team of attorneys. Never again would she be able to expose that soft skin to me, to Alexander, or anyone else.

Eyeing the uncanny whiteness of her toes, their nails tipped with pale blue polish, I questioned whether the act of violence I'd committed counted as a true murder, the dictionary having qualified its definition with the phrase "especially with malice aforethought." Not at any time over the eight months we'd been lovers had I considered depriving Elise of all her tomorrows. Pure and simple, mine had been an impulse of passion, a fatal burst of wild jealousy. No aforethought whatsoever.

In the midst of these thoughts someone knocked on my door.

The sound—hesitant rather than forthright—didn't rattle me. Mostly I was curious: Unless I was expecting a visit from Elise, or I'd been late with the rent, rarely did anyone swing their fists against my door. I stood up, ran my hands down my undershirt to smooth it, closed the bedroom door behind me, crossed the living room in half a dozen steps, and unlocked the front door. Before me stood the squat figure of the woman who lived directly above my apartment with her husband and two kids. Her worn dress and apron reeked of fish.

"Good evening. It's . . . Mrs. Rinnoti, isn't it?"

"That's right, Mr. Shamley."

"What brings you down here at dinner time?" I said, pointing to her apron. What I really wanted to know was why she wasn't washing her dishes instead of standing at my door, intruding upon my evening.

Her olive face dark with blood, she avoided looking into my eyes, which had contracted under the glare of the unshielded bulb in the hallway. "I heard . . . a scream . . . a woman . . . I come down to make sure everything's . . . okay."

"Very considerate of you, Mrs. Rinnoti. Sorry I had my TV on so loud."

"TV?" As she looked past me at the 27-incher resting silent and blank-faced on its wire stand, I wished I'd thought to at least turn on the overhead light.

Noticing the sting of Elise's nails, I drew my hands behind my back and hoped no blood had gotten onto my T-shirt. "I was watching a mystery."

"A mystery?"

"Sure. A *murder* mystery. You must watch them sometimes, too."

She shook her head. "My husband and my boys watch—I don't like."

"Well, I find a good murder mystery calms me down after a rough day at work, Mrs. Rinnoti."

"Murder . . . relaxes you, Mr. Shamley?"

"Sure, it takes my mind off all the things I didn't get done today, all the things I've got to do tomorrow."

Mrs. Rinnoti shook her head again, this time mournfully. "It sounded . . . so real."

"Of course." I cleared my throat. "With high definition and surround sound, it can almost sound like someone's being murdered in your very own apartment."

Again Mrs. Rinnoti looked past my shoulder, this time at the sofa and coffee table, both cluttered with magazines.

"But I'm sorry I disturbed you," I blundered on. "I got to thinking it was too loud and turned it off. Now I see I did bother you and your family. It won't happen again, Mrs. Rinnoti," I promised.

Once I'd closed the door on her dark-ringed eyes, I raised my hands to my face: Even in the dimness I could see blood had surfaced in the narrow gouges. I didn't

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notice any traces of red on my T-shirt, but what if Mrs. Rinnoti hadn't bought my story and was placing a phone call to the police station at that very moment?

I returned to the bedroom half hoping I'd been mistaken, that I hadn't strangled Elise to death but had simply caused her to black out and that, by now, she had come out of it—enraged, coughing her head off, but alive.

She lay staring intently toward the window, as if searching for the early stars that had surfaced against the black of evening. Never having felt passionate enough to kill before, I had no idea how to go about eliminating that bundle of *prima-facie* in my sheets. My first impulse was to drag her off the mattress and fold her into the bottom of my closet, but that would only have delayed what needed to be done. Certainly I wouldn't be able to reenact any of the scenarios I'd witnessed on the tube—sawing off parts of the body and tucking them into a suitcase like Raymond Burr did in *Rear Window;* or packing the body whole into a huge shipping trunk like Maggie Smith had managed so coolly in *Keeping Mum*—besides, I had no one I could call upon to help me carry the trunk out of my apartment. Not many options were open to me in a city walk-up where philanderers and drunks were passing through the lobby all night long.

As I looked Elise over from head to toe, so striking, so dead, I was unexpectedly overcome by a rush of empathy—struck by how grossly unfair it was that her future prospects for love, family, and personal accomplishment had been erased simply because she preferred Alexander the attorney over Justin the computer graphics guy. Who knows? Eventually Alexander might have become the father of her children, including a little girl who would, in due time, blossom into another Elise. Remorseful, I lifted her hand and pressed it between mine, her long ivory fingers still faintly warm; two of her nails, broken, were tinged with blood. With fingers like these, she might've become an accomplished pianist, or at least a massage therapist. The way she was lying half turned on her hip, her neck twisted unnaturally, made me feel very uncomfortable, so I straightened out her arms and legs, rolled her over fully onto her back, and, with the tips of my fingers, drew her eyelids closed. Since the evening had turned cool, I slid the light blanket from the foot of the bed up over her legs and chest.

While rummaging for ideas to solve my problem, one part of my brain remained on alert, listening for the sounds of vehicles—especially those that might screech to a halt outside my building. But the street was as still and quiet as Elise, with most people already parked in front of their televisions, giving their dinners time to digest before nodding off. The only encouraging thought I had was that maybe Mrs. Rinnoti had believed me, that it had never occurred to her to contact the police. Such a non-development would give me an extra day or two to figure out the best way to dispose of the body. But what if the people in the apartment below had been home and had heard Elise screech? They were new to the building and might have called the cops without coming up to see what a clean-cut guy I am. Not at all the kind of person who would do such a horrible thing.

"Your troubles may be over," I whispered to Elise, "but mine are just beginning."

To someone who doesn't know me well my life may not seem worth protecting, but it has supplied most of Justin Shamley's needs quite well, thank you: I've had the same good job for five years, and my boss appreciates my work—I create computer graphics for a small architectural firm to make presentations more attractive to potential clients. My apartment may be small (bedroom, living room, kitchen) but it's comfortable and quiet, and most of my neighbors mind

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their own business. My one claim to elegance is a silver BMW, which I bought used a few years ago; lately, however, it's had a tendency to stall out. (If I somehow managed to get Elise downstairs and fit her into its small trunk, what would I do if the car failed to start?) The only thing I really lacked, now that Elise was gone, was a love life. But I'm a reasonably intelligent, pleasant-looking guy—dark haired with only a few strands of gray. Not too tall, not too short. I'm not much of a drinker and don't do drugs, at least not anymore. If I couldn't rustle up a replacement for Elise at my office or in a local tavern, I could always sign up with a dating service, or surf chat rooms on the Internet.

Of course, none of my personal advantages were doing me any good whatsoever in solving my immediate problem. It was only later in the evening that sheer exhaustion brought a couple of ideas to mind: Why not wait up until well past midnight, then drag Elise to the back window? With no moon out tonight, no one would be likely to notice me pushing her body off the fire escape and down into the concrete-covered courtyard. Later a note would be found in her pocket, indicating that, distraught over our broken love affair, she'd lost her desire to live. Then I remembered those dark marks on her throat.

Or I could set Elise in my bathtub, then head out to an all-night pharmacy to purchase a five-gallon jug of a strong drain cleaner. Wouldn't it slowly but steadily eat away her flesh and bones until there was nothing left? Only that would take a very long time, and what about the stink?—not only of decomposition, but of lye. Killing someone, I was beginning to understand, required a good deal more planning than I'd ever imagined.

At a quarter past eleven I sat down at my computer and started Googling: I mean, if you can find complete details on how to build a pipe bomb to blow up your fellow workers, or how to kill a spouse with a knife (like that guy in England), why shouldn't there be a site to help someone get rid of a body? After trying half a dozen keywords, I found myself cornered in the realm of funeral services, and that's where I came upon the most promising concept I'd had all night: cremation. Obviously I couldn't just sprinkle her with gasoline and strike a match, so I tried to locate a compact, clean-burning, personal cremation oven, but not even eBay offered such a specialty item.

Next I cruised through listings for death in general and murder in particular and got mostly statistical breakdowns by sex and age: X-thousand had died of heart attacks at home or on the job; X-many by auto accidents. Most murder victims in America were apparently brought down by gunshot—pistols, hunting rifles, semiautomatics—while another goodly number succumb to knives, razors, or scissors. Poisoning is fairly popular, too. Oddly enough, I didn't come across figures for death by strangulation. Either I hadn't Googled long enough, or the art of strangulation was in decline after having enjoyed such prominence in Boston years ago. I shut down my computer deeply disillusioned, having long believed that the Internet could provide useful information about absolutely anything.

I marched back into the bedroom dead on my feet. Of course Elise had not moved in the slightest, but in the expanded shadows of deepening night, it looked as though the expression on her face had altered slightly—sagging a bit—and the strap marks on her throat had darkened. Otherwise she looked at peace, proud of herself for having placed me in such an awkward situation.

My feet wouldn't move any farther so, unbuckling my trousers and dropping them onto the floor, I crawled uneasily into bed, sliding under the blanket

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alongside her—careful not to touch any part of her body. We both lay absolutely still, as if quietly acclimating ourselves to our respective fates, until I closed my eyes and, in moments, dropped off into a deep grave of sleep.

I was awakened by a massive pounding on my door. The bright-eyed slot on the night-table clock showed 3:26 A.M. Why the hell, I wondered, would anyone be knocking on my door at such a god-awful time . . . unless one of the drunks from the lobby had found his way upstairs. In a few hours I'd have to climb out of bed and begin preparing for another day at the office. Something more than the knocking on my door seemed to be troubling me, but I couldn't quite grasp its tail and hold it still. When the pounding stopped, I gasped with relief, as if a fresh breeze had blown in my window. Then the pounding started again, louder than before, and I shouted, "Stop that racket or I'll call the cops!"

Only then did I remember Elise, poor Elise. Rolling over quickly onto my side I saw her stretched out beside me, a faint smile upon her lips. ●

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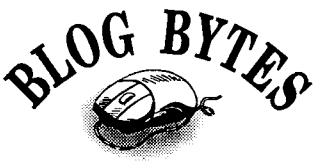

by Bill Crider

Murder on the Air: One of this column's readers sent me an e-mail to remind me that for people who like to listen to tales of mystery as well as read them, there are a lot of sources of entertainment on the Internet. Part of the charter at BBC 7 **(http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbc7)** is to re-broadcast old radio shows, and it's a good place to hear tales about Sherlock Holmes. Agatha Christie's stories are also popular there, along with some comedy and science fiction. BBC 4 **(http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4)** has fewer mysteries, but they do turn up there.

There are any number of Internet sites devoted to old-time radio (OTR to its fans). *OTR.Network Library* **(http://www.otr.net)**, for example has "over 12,000 . . . shows available for instant listening." You can hear the cases of sleuths like Philip Marlowe and Sam Spade, who might be a bit different from the characters you've read about in books by Chandler and Hammett but who are nevertheless entertaining. You can listen to the adventures of Jack, Doc, and Reggie on *I Love a Mystery*, a personal favorite. And you shouldn't miss *Pat Novak for Hire* with a pre-*Dragnet* Jack Webb spouting more similes per second than any private-eye before or since. There are many others: *Nero Wolfe, The Falcon, Barry Craig, Michael Shayne, Rocky Fortune*, and on and on.

Another fine site is *Old Time Radio Fans* **(http://www.oldtimeradiofans.com)**, which, like OTR.Network Library, offers listeners hundreds of shows. Both have comedy, science fiction, and variety shows as well as mysteries. Not to mention Westerns like *Hopalong Cassidy, Gunsmoke,* and *Have Gun, Will Travel.*

Yet another site worth checking out is *RadioLovers.com* **(http://www.radiolovers.com)**, where you can find many shows for free listening. Some of the same shows mentioned above are available here, but you need to check all three sites to be sure you find what you're looking for.

Finally, if you're interested in the history of OTR or if you'd just like to learn more about it, a good resource is *Old-Time Radio* **(http://www.old-time.com).** You can have a look at the frequently asked questions or find lots of basic information.

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Art by Mark Evans

A Death

by Kevin Wignall

Hammond stayed in the car, knowing it would cost him his place in the Branch and maybe even his career. At first he'd tried to defend himself by imagining that if his first job had been anything other than this, he'd have been able to go through with it, but he realized now that they'd chosen him for this job specifically, as a final test.

And he'd failed. Perhaps they'd even anticipated it, perhaps his bosses were betting with each other right now on the odds of him being in the car while Baker was inside killing the old lady. His stomach tightened with the reminder of it, the fact that Baker was inside that neat little bungalow, ending the life of a seventy-nine-year-old woman.

Hammond would have been in the car no matter what threat she'd posed, but he couldn't imagine any justification for killing her. She'd served her country for the best part of fifty years, he knew that much, yet now, for whatever reason, she'd become a liability in the eyes of her former masters and had to be removed.

He looked at the garden, the first spring flowers beaten relentlessly, but somehow holding their own against the overcast bluster of this threatening March day. He wondered if she looked after the place herself or if she had a gardener. And he wondered about the view, which was surely uninterrupted down to the sea, even though it wasn't visible from this side of the house. Above all, he tried not to think about what was happening inside.

And then he didn't have to think about anything, except the imminent downward spiral of his own career, because Baker stepped carefully through the

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front door and walked back to the car.

He leaned down before getting in and smiled, saying, "You're looking a little green—you want me to drive?"

"I'm fine," said Hammond and started the engine as Baker got in and buckled up.

He hated Baker now, not just for the air of superiority, the way he was looking down at him as if he were some kid out of his depth, but because he was everything Hammond had failed to be. Baker was in his thirties, but he'd probably always looked like that and always would, an easy confidence about him, comfortable with his own life, comfortable with ending the lives of others.

"You realize I have to report this."

Hammond nodded and said, "I don't suppose they'll give me a second chance?"

"Doubt it," said Baker. "Shame of it is, Dorothy Jennings wasn't a tough one. Diabetics overdose on insulin every day. And she didn't put up much of a struggle, so that was it, really. Easy. Peaceful."

She didn't put up much of a struggle—what horrors could be hidden within a phrase like that! Hammond's stomach was gnawing at itself, the nausea swelling as he listened to Baker's glib description of an elderly woman's murder.

"That could've been your grandmother in there."

"But it wasn't," said Baker. "I'm not gonna give you all that 'ours is not to reason why' stuff, but you can't be personal about this—job needs to be done, you do it. Dorothy Jennings understood that, and she did plenty in her time." Hammond knew there was more to come and sure enough, Baker added almost as an afterthought, "She wouldn't have stayed in the car."

Hammond guessed it was pointless fighting his corner. Baker was the senior officer, he'd report back that Hammond had bottled, and that would be it, game over.

He could argue as much as he liked that there was a difference between occasionally having to kill an enemy of the state and killing one of its former servants—but arguing suggested thinking and they didn't want him to be a thinker.

"Stop the car," said Baker, with such urgency that Hammond wondered if he'd left something at the scene.

They were in a narrow country lane with no other traffic ahead or behind so Hammond hit the brakes firmly and waited till they were at a standstill before saying, "What is it?"

"Back up to that signpost back there." Hammond dutifully reversed and waited while Baker studied the black script on the small white sign that pointed down an even narrower lane. "Amazing. Take this right."

Hammond did as he said but couldn't resist saying, "What do you have in mind, a little sightseeing after a good morning's murder?"

Baker snapped back at him, "Hey, I don't enjoy what I just did, but it's my job! If you can't cut it, that's fine, but don't get smart with me, Hammond!"

He was furious, but not upset, and Hammond felt it was a little misplaced

Kevin Wignall is not a prolific short story writer, but he has produced three previous tales for this magazine and a couple for the anthology market since his debut on the crime scene in 2002 with the novel *People Die*. His fourth novel, *Who Is Conrad Hirst?*, was nominated for this year's Edgar Allan Poe Award for Best Paperback Original and is currently up for the Barry Award, whose winner will be announced at the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention in October.

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when he said, "Sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"That's right, you shouldn't!" Baker took a couple of beats to calm down, then said, "There's a hotel down here, that's all, overlooking the sea—we stayed here a few times when I was a kid."

"I see," said Hammond, though he didn't.

It was hard to imagine Baker ever having been a kid, but he certainly didn't seem like someone who went in for nostalgic visits. And it wasn't just that Baker was hard, it was as if all the edges had been worn off him, leaving nothing on which another human being could gain purchase, like an abstract bronze, seamlessly cast.

Perhaps Baker sensed his confusion because he said, "It's a good place to eat—we can lunch there and then head back."

"Right, I get it."

He didn't want to eat, of course, or didn't think he could, but it took them twenty minutes to get there and by that time his stomach had settled a little.

The unimaginatively named Point Hotel was an attractive white Victorian place that had undoubtedly seen better days and was somehow sullied further by the presence of a dozen or so cars and a small bus outside.

It was situated on its own promontory, a moss-sprung patch of green with dark cliffs that were ragged and broken enough to allow easy access down to the water's edge.

Not that anyone would want to be down there on a day like this, the sea like liquid slate, threatening and muscular. Even as they walked into the hotel, fifty yards from the nearest cliff edge, Hammond could feel the salt moisture in the wind, and the noise was enough to create a sudden sensation of deafness as they stepped into the lobby.

The menu wasn't particularly diverse and they both ordered steaks, but they were good when they came and Hammond felt better for getting something in his stomach. They both drank mineral water, which suggested either that Baker planned on doing some of the driving or that he didn't believe in drinking on the job.

For the most part they ate in silence, and the only distraction from their own thoughts was when they'd almost finished and a party of schoolchildren spilled clumsily past the dining-room windows and out across the promontory.

There were about twenty of them, maybe fourteen- or fifteen-year-olds, togged up in waterproof coats, hair flying wildly in the wind. Three teachers, two women and a man, were trying in a half-hearted way to keep them under control, calling out cheery admonitions.

All it did was remind Hammond that he couldn't imagine Baker ever having been like that. And in turn, that made him think of Dorothy Jennings again, her insulin-poisoned body waiting to be found even as they enjoyed their food and thought about the long drive ahead of them.

The nausea returned unexpectedly on the back of those thoughts, as if it had merely been lying low, waiting to ambush him. He didn't think there'd be any quelling it this time, either. He pushed quickly away from the table, fearing for a second or two that he wouldn't even make it out of the dining room.

Baker had just put down his knife and fork but looked surprised and said, "Something wrong?"

"No," said Hammond. "I'm not sure. You'll have to excuse me for a minute."

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Baker couldn't help laughing to himself a little as he watched Hammond make a dash for the toilets. He'd known from the minute he'd met him that Hammond wouldn't be able to cut it and this was just about the final proof. The guy hadn't even made it inside the bungalow and now he was revisiting his lunch.

He settled the bill in cash and stepped outside to get a feel for the place while he was on his own. It wasn't quite the same, of course, because they'd always come here in the summer, but they were still big memories, happy, swelling up almost as dangerously as the sea below him.

He wished these kids weren't running around shouting, because even though he'd known this place as a boy himself, he didn't remember it ever being loud or raucous. Back then, as recently as twenty or so years earlier, it had been the kind of hotel where children were expected to behave, where a certain genteel calm had ruled.

He walked a little distance from the hotel, closer to the point where the cliffs broke down in a way that allowed an easy path to the water's edge. It had been one of his favourite haunts as a child, a haven of rock pools at low tide, out of sight of the hotel terrace. The kids were here too, though, volatile, running where they wanted.

The male teacher was right on the far tip of the promontory with a group of three kids. The two female teachers were standing close to Baker but were so busy talking that they had no idea what their charges were doing. He was tempted to go over and tell them to keep their kids under control but his chain of thought was interrupted by something more pressing.

Despite all the shouting and excited screams, he immediately picked out a girl shouting, "Oh my God!" She'd shouted no louder than any of the others but he'd picked it out immediately because her tone was strikingly different, the tone of urgency and fear.

He spotted her, followed her gaze to sea, and saw it instantly, a pulsing swell coming in, deceptively flat at the moment, but only because it was broad and high, a big enough wall of water to overwhelm the lower reaches of those cliffs.

The girl was screaming now, directing her shouts to someone on the rocks below. He'd seen a few of the kids run down the path and seen some emerge, and he wondered how many were still down there, how many had lingered too long. She seemed to be calling a single name, so maybe it was just one.

A couple of the girl's friends joined in with her, a hopeless siren chorus, desperately trying to tell one of their classmates what the teachers should already have told them, that it was dangerous to be down there, that soon it would be fatal.

The two female teachers glanced in the direction of the girls but still didn't seem unduly concerned. Baker looked at the swell and knew already that it was too late, that this would be in the papers tomorrow, because someone was about to die.

He looked back to the hotel, willing Hammond to get a move on. They had to get away from here now, or soon, before there were emergency services on the scene and a need for witness statements.

It wasn't so much that he didn't care, just that it was his job and his duty not to become part of it. Besides, one look at that incoming wall of water had told him all he needed to know, that there was nothing they could do.

The chorus screamed. He turned back to the cliffs and saw the spray explode into the air, causing more excited screams from those who didn't yet know what had happened below. The two female teachers stopped talking and looked with astonishment as the spray fell away again like the dying bursts of fireworks.

One of the screaming girls appeared to faint and was left on the floor. The first

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to scream turned and shouted at her teachers, her voice full of terror but clear and strong.

"Tom's in the water!"

He heard the teachers swear in hushed panic, then one of the two took control, saying to her colleague, "Call the coast guard, then go and get Dave!"

Baker guessed Dave was the male teacher who still didn't appear to know that anything was wrong. The woman who was left standing near Baker started fumbling for her phone. The other ran toward the cliffs and started calling the children away, telling them to get back near the hotel, all too late.

And as if proof were needed, Baker spotted the kid in the sea, his head alone visible out on the swell, looking almost like a seal from up above, not a boy who had the screaming shock of the cold coursing through him, a boy who would drown or die of hypothermia long before any helicopter arrived.

The scene descended into panic within seconds, as first some of the kids, then all of them, became aware of what had happened. The male teacher was running back, bringing the three kids in a trail behind him. Others were running back to the hotel on their own. Two more were attending to the girl who'd fainted.

Some just stood, not knowing what to do. There were always some like that, thought Baker, and in a terrorist attack or natural disaster, those were the people who inevitably died.

The female teacher who'd laughably attempted to take control was shouting instructions at people, unaware that the kids were following their own instincts as much now as they had been ten minutes before. The other teacher was cursing shakily to herself as she tried and failed to get a signal on her phone.

Then Baker saw him, a boy with a mess of brown hair, and he was instantly mesmerized. In the middle of all this chaos, unnoticed by any of his friends or teachers, the boy was calmly taking off his coat, then his shoes, then his socks.

Baker knew what the boy was planning— how could he not know?—and a part of him wanted to tell him that it was the wrong decision, that he wouldn't be saving anyone, only killing himself. But the boy's movements were so graceful, they seemed to produce an air of transcendent peace around him upon which it would have been impossible to intrude.

The boy left his things on the ground and walked the few yards to the top of the path. Even now, barefoot on the cold rocky slope, he didn't walk gingerly but with a strangely assured step. It was like watching an Indian mystic walk effortlessly across burning coals.

Baker found himself walking forward, not with the aim of stopping the boy, just in eagerness to keep him in sight as he descended toward the water's edge. At the same time, the male teacher, still some way off, saw the kid and started shouting, not at the boy but at the female teacher, who looked around frantically, unable to see what it was that she was meant to be doing.

The attention of the whole party finally fell on the boy just as it became too late to intervene. He stood on the rocks above the water, as oblivious to their shouts as the boy who was already out there riding the swell. He studied the waves as a surfer would and then, as if in slow motion, he sprang away from the rocks in an easy and confident dive.

He'd been like a boy outside of time, superhuman, but the illusion exploded the moment he hit the bitter truth of the water. When he emerged through the swell, he swam furiously, perhaps in that first adrenaline rush of dread realization

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that the sea was colder than he'd expected, fiercer, that his undoubted bravery had been fatally misplaced.

Even as the boy reached his friend, Baker felt a terrible sorrow for him, because he was strong and decent and selfless and he would die for it. His friend would die for being stupid, but in a sense, the second boy would die for being noble but stupider still.

"I need the coast guard! The Point Hotel, a boy went in the water, two boys." It was the female teacher, some way behind him, close to hysteria.

A girl walked past Baker, drifting towards the hotel in shock. She looked at him and said, as if he were a reporter or a policeman, "His name was Jake."

Baker nodded, though he doubted the girl was even aware of him, and certainly didn't know that she'd been right to use the past tense. He looked out to sea, one of many sets of eyes fixed on the same spot of the ocean's darkening pulse.

The boy whose name had been Jake was holding the other, holding his head as if trying to give him instructions, but he was constantly glancing further out to sea, too. Maybe he was looking for a rescue boat, or maybe he was just overawed by the scale of the waves now that he was almost underneath them.

But the kid was stronger than Baker could have imagined. The swell looked uniform from up on the cliff, but the boy appeared to see something, whatever it was he'd been waiting for, the right wave, and suddenly he grabbed his friend more firmly around the body and with what looked like practised ease, the two of them rode it right back onto the rocks, travelling fast.

The rescuer hit the lower rocks fiercely but was moving immediately, scrambling away from the waterline, dragging the first boy, who'd washed up like a dead seabird. There was still no complacency about him as he cajoled his friend into movement, hauling him onto his feet, starting him up the path.

It took Baker a moment to realize that this had not ended as it should have done. Instead, the impossible had happened and both boys had somehow been delivered from the waves.

Some of the kids above cheered and whooped spontaneously. Some were crying. The male teacher ran down the path to help them and, after some awkward manoeuvring, picked up the first boy and carried him the rest of the way.

The second boy, whose name was Jake, walked slowly behind them, shivering, the first signs of exhaustion pulling at him. Even in that state, his brown hair plastered to his head and face, his clothes hanging cold against his frame, there was a startling air of peace about him. He didn't look like someone who'd just performed a miracle and saved a life in the process.

Baker stared at the boy, still in his island of calm amidst the maelstrom that had swept up the rest of them, and he felt himself lurch, as if something had been ripped open deep inside him, as if he might drop down dead right there on that promontory. That was exactly how it felt to Baker, as if he could feel the life draining out of himself.

What had wounded him to the core was a devastating realization. At first he'd thought it was a sense of loss, seeing that boy act the way he had, his selflessness, and realizing that he'd long shed the quality of behaving like that—of behaving in a way that was recklessly, beautifully human.

But it was worse than that. It was the realization that he had never been that boy. He wouldn't have dived in at fifteen and he wouldn't have dived in now, not because he was afraid but because within himself he possessed no reason to dive.

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Baker didn't fear death and he'd thought that was enough, but it wasn't an absence of fear that had made that boy act the way he had, it was greater than that, it was a love of life, an urge to protect it against all the odds, heroism in its purest form. And Baker had never lost those attributes because he'd never had them.

He turned, trying to get himself away from the scene, but as he started walking back to the hotel he couldn't help but think of Dorothy Jennings. She'd saved six people in the Yemen once, at enormous risk to her own safety. If he'd told her this morning that her death would save one other person she'd have probably administered the overdose herself. That was the life he had ended today.

Hammond emerged from the building looking drained and pale. He smiled apologetically and Baker faltered and stopped walking for a moment. He'd despised Hammond until now, but he knew as soon as he looked at him exactly what Hammond would have done if he'd been out there just five minutes earlier. He probably didn't know it himself, but Hammond would have dived.

Hammond was ready for the gloating, for the ridicule. He wasn't ready for the scene he met with as he stepped out of the hotel. It took him just a moment to realize some emergency had taken place. There were groups of kids huddled near the hotel, upset and shocked, more out on the promontory with the teachers, formed together in a larger huddle as if attending to someone who was hurt.

Most disturbing of all was Baker. He was walking directly towards him but he looked terrible, as if someone had turned off his power supply. It wasn't that he looked upset, more that he looked . . . grief-stricken.

"What's happened?"

Baker appeared to regain some of his composure and said, "Nothing, a kid went in the water, but he's okay."

Hammond looked over Baker's shoulder and tried to see what was going on in the larger huddle. He knew instinctively that they'd be better placed to help with casualties than the teachers would.

"Shouldn't we help? He could go into shock."

"No, we can't be here—we have to get away as quickly as possible." His eyes had been darting around, unstable, but he fixed Hammond now and said, "They've called the coast guard, and the kids are both okay. Trust me, they'll be fine without us."

It was so strange to hear Baker using reassuring language that Hammond started walking with him back to the car, glancing once more at the scene behind them as he said, "Both? I thought you said one kid went in the water?"

"One got swept in by a wave, another dived in to pull him out."

"That's amazing, at this time of year, as well."

Baker nodded and said, "It was amazing. I don't think I've ever seen anything like it." As if remembering himself, he added, "Stupid, too. Any other time, they'd both be dead."

Hammond ignored the criticism and tried to think what he would have done in the same situation, whether now or as a kid of that age. He didn't think he'd have dived in after anyone, not at this time of year anyway, but he liked to think he would have done. At least, he was certain he couldn't have stood by and done nothing.

As they reached the car, Baker said, "Do you mind driving?"

He still didn't sound like himself, but Hammond said, "Of course not—it's the least I can do after messing up this morning."

They got in the car and drove away. Baker took some mints from his pocket

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and offered him one, which he accepted gratefully, anything to shake off the bilious aftertaste in his mouth.

"About this morning," said Baker. "I'll tell them you came into the house, that it went off smoothly. If you want me to, that is."

Hammond couldn't believe what he was hearing, and turned briefly to check that Baker wasn't messing with him.

"Of course, yeah, if you don't mind."

"If I tell them what happened your career's finished, and that wouldn't be right. You've got a good career ahead of you, Hammond, but . . ." Baker hesitated, then said, "It isn't with this Branch. Do yourself a favour and ask for a transfer. You could do better than this."

He didn't see that he had a choice anyway, not in the long term, because there'd be another Dorothy Jennings sooner or later and he'd make the same decision every time.

"I will," said Hammond. "And thanks."

He still wasn't convinced Baker was being straight with him, unless whatever he'd witnessed back there at the hotel had made him want to do a good deed for someone. Maybe he'd misread Baker, too, but something had certainly changed in him since finishing lunch.

With the thought of lunch, he said, "And I'm sorry I lost it this morning—I don't know what happened there."

Baker took a few seconds to respond, his voice subdued as he said finally, "It's easy for people like me to take it for granted, what we do, but there's no shame in you losing it. You witnessed a death today, and that's no small thing."

Hammond nodded. He was about to correct him, to tell him he hadn't actually witnessed the death firsthand, but he kept driving and remained silent, and Baker remained silent next to him. There had been a death—that was all that mattered. ●

Our Size Change

EQMM is ending its 2008 publishing year with a slight change in size. It's natural for readers to want their favorite publications to stay exactly as they've always been, and with that in mind, we've tried hard over the years to be faithful to *EQMM*'s original compact format, similar to a paperback book. We know that many of our readers want a magazine that can be shelved and saved, and that is as easily carried around to be read in transit as laid on a bedside table. We believe the issue you hold in your hands meets those requirements. With its increase of only five-sixteenths of an inch in height, it should fit most bookshelves that house older issues; and it's still small enough overall to go conveniently into a handbag.

We expect the five-eighths of an inch we've added to the magazine's width to enhance our dramatic and colorful classic pulp-art covers. Inside, the extra space and more open pages are designed for greater ease in reading. Another advantage to readers is that we're going to be taking the opportunity of our size change to shift certain print features to our Web site, **www.themysteryplace.com.** For example, the yearly index, which has appeared in the last issue of the year since 1946, will now be found on our Web site instead, and will be expanded, eventually, to accommodate searches by author from a database going all the way back to the magazine's inception. Currently a work in progress, this, like other coming *EQMM* Web features, is intended to extend a service to readers while reserving as many print pages as possible for fiction.

As always, we welcome your comments. If you shop for *EQMM* at retail stores, we'll be especially glad to know if you can spot us better now in the crowded racks!

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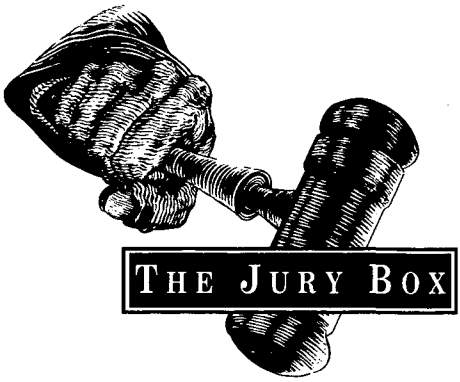

by Jon L. Breen

While the current crime-fiction scene may have no one quite as prolific as Edgar Wallace, Georges Simenon, or the multi-bylined John Creasey, a few writers qualify as marvels of productivity. Max Allan Collins has been reviewed in this space by the present juror more than any other writer, partly because he turns out so many books but mainly because of their consistently high quality. His second under the pseudonym Patrick Culhane ranks with his best.

**** Patrick Culhane: *Red Sky in Morning,* Morrow, $24.95. In 1944, ensign Peter Maxwell, though happily married with a comfortable gig as a Navy choir director, joins three friends in volunteering for duty on a new munitions-carrying ship. The officers, including a bigoted but pragmatic captain, are white; the crew, apart from four non-coms, are black. Thanks to his friendship with fellow musician and unofficial crew leader Sarge Washington, in civilian life a homicide detective in Chicago's Bronzeville, Pete is able to keep relations peaceful, even after the Port Chicago disaster, in which many black seamen died. While an on-ship murder investigation in the second half provides a fine whodunit, the novel is even more notable as an account of men at war, in the tradition of Herman Wouk's *The Caine Mutiny,* and as a realistic depiction of the attitudes of its time, including (the reader is warned) "unpleasant language in matters of race and sexual orientation." The book is dedicated to the author's late father and based in part on his World War II experiences.

*** Max Allan Collins: *The First Quarry,* Hard Case, $6.99. My January 1978 review of Collins's *The Slasher,* about a darkly humorous killer for hire named Quarry, concluded with atypical prescience that the author seemed "a good bet for future glory." The latest Quarry is a prequel to the rest of the series. In 1970, the former Vietnam sniper, a newly recruited hitman anxious to avoid collateral damage, is sent to Iowa City to eliminate a womanizing novelist and creative-writing professor. Complications ensue and carnage rises in a typically expert piece of fast-paced storytelling.

*** Ken Bruen: *Once Were Cops,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $22.95. With three new books in the reviewing pile, Bruen is another favorite writer tough to keep up with. Galway cop

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Michael O'Shea, a psychopathic killer reminiscent of a Jim Thompson character, pulls strings to enter an exchange program with the NYPD, welcoming the chance to carry a gun and exercise his murderous impulses in other creative ways. Though I don't see how the blank pages and spaces between lines serve any other purpose than to make a very short novel look longer, there's no denying this is a gripping, neatly plotted specimen of fiction noir, finishing with a shock ending that leaves the reader to connect the dots. Bruen holds his incongruous highbrow literary asides mostly at bay, but he can't resist having his cops throw in references to James Joyce and Emily Dickinson.

*** Ken Bruen: *Cross,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $23.95. A much more decent albeit depressed and alcoholic Galway sleuth, former Guard turned private eye Jack Taylor, interrupts his brooding to investigate a young man's crucifixion murder at the request of a lesbian cop almost as surly as he is. That a reader would be willing to spend page after page in the company of a character as miserable and unpleasant as Taylor is a tribute to the wonders of Bruen's flavorful Irish prose, vivid sense of place, and very dark humor. (A writer can be no-end self-indulgent if enough readers are cheering from the sidelines, but there are limits. Bruen's *The Max* [Hard Case, $6.99], written with Jason Starr, lost me early in the going with its incessant plugging of other writers.)

*** Chet Cunningham: *The Mystery of Hamlin Springs,* Five Star, $25.95. Young Cal Winters comes to the Tennessee village of the title to find out who murdered two of his relatives eighty years before, and it becomes clear that anyone with his surname is regarded with fear and suspicion by certain members of the arts and crafts community, including a clock maker, wood sculptor, chair maker, and potter. The characters are involving and several interlocking mysteries are satisfactorily solved in an agreeable entertainment by the author of over three hundred books in various genres. Weakest element is the bland title.

*** Domenic Stansberry: *The Ancient Rain,* St. Martin's Minotaur, $24.95. San Francisco private eye Dante Mancuso looks into the case of Bill Owens, a Symbionese Liberation Army member turned solid citizen who is arrested in front of his children when a decades-old accusation of murder in the course of a bank robbery is reopened by federal investigators in the immediate aftermath of 9/11. The Italian-American North Beach area and the highly charged Bay Area political scene are brought to life in a thoughtful, well-written, surprising novel.

*** Aaron Elkins: *Uneasy Relations,* Berkley, $23.95. Forensic scientist Gideon Oliver and wife Julie travel to Gibraltar, where the skeletons of a woman and child have suggested a link between Homo sapiens and Neanderthals. Conflict and murder among the gathered anthropologists and archaeologists enliven the best recent case in a long-standing series notable for humor, clued detection, and a continuing emphasis on food and travel.

** Hal White: *The Mysteries of Reverend Dean,* Lighthouse, $14.95. Six impossible crime problems confront retired small-town Washington clergyman Thaddeus Dean. On purely literary grounds, there's plenty to nitpick, mainly perfunctory characterization, but the plots are so ingenious that John Dickson Carr fans and other classical devotees won't want to miss these contributions to a demanding and increasingly rare criminous art form. The Christian religious messages should bother no one but the most militant atheist. **(continued on page 83)**

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Art by Allen Davis

COUNTING CHICKENS

by Amy Myers

I grew up in a moral household. For my seventh birthday, having reached an age of understanding, I was presented with a collection of Aesop's fables; its precepts, so my father assured me, could be guaranteed to see me safely through life. I read them eagerly, learning one exciting revelation after another. Although they seemed to have no immediate relevance to a schoolchild of my tender years in the small village of Lower Beeching, they seemed to me to have great moral worth. Appearances, I learned, for example, are often deceiving, any excuse would serve a tyrant, and familiarity breeds contempt. However, it was a particular favourite of my father's that emblazoned its glory on my mind.

"Remember," he would thunder, "that the gods help those that help themselves."

I therefore resolved to help myself at every opportunity. It served me well, in my life, work, and marriage—until I reached the age of thirty-four.

Then I helped myself to my neighbour's wife.

In Her Majesty's prisons there is ample time available both for telling stories and for Aesop's great works, for I have, of course, brought my copy with me in order to study where I went astray. How had the concept of helping myself failed me? Did "self-conceit lead to self-destruction"? Mindful of Aesop's advice in this respect, I shall keep myself suitably anonymous while I recount as objectively as possible how my self-destruction came about. For much of

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the story that follows I was present as one of the eight involved, and for the rest I have based my tale on the story that later emerged.

It all began on a Saturday in late September, the day of the last barbecue of the summer. . . .

"Where," Leonora asked casually, in her irresistibly husky voice, "are the chicken kebabs, Tony?"

"There aren't any," her husband replied offhandedly. "The supermarket was out of them." It was unusual for the devoted Tony to pay such little regard to his wife's demands.

The gorgeous eyes flashed. "Then why didn't you buy some chicken and make some?"

Many of Amy Myers's stories for *EQMM* are historical, either in her Tom Wasp chimney sweep series or the Victorian chef Auguste Didier series. This month she provides an observant contemporary tale set in an upscale housing development. Her most recent books in print are from a series that combines historical and contemporary. See the characters Marsh and Daughter in *Murder in the Mist* (Severn House '08) and in the large-print edition of *Murder and the Golden Goblet*. †

Clad in flowing white silk, Leonora looked magnetically magnificent and utterly desirable. Impractical though flowing white silk might be at a barbecue, the other three wives present, clad in khaki shorts (Jane), tight black designer jeans (Annabel), and a wraparound crumpled beach skirt (Liz), didn't even begin to compete.

They need not have bothered anyway, since their husbands' eyes were automatically feasting themselves on Leonora's seductive charms. Richard (Jane's steady but plodding accountant husband), pompous businessman Hector (husband and provider for the superior Annabel), and Patrick (sporty Liz's husband, whenever he could spare the time from other women) all glowered scorn on the useless, albeit rich, Tony. If looks could have killed, Leonora could have been free to enjoy another's charms that very moment.

For once, Tony stood up for himself. "The food's your job."

"Not," Leonora said firmly, "for a barbecue. Now we don't have enough to cook. Oh Tony, I relied on you," she told him reproachfully. "It isn't much to ask, is it?" She turned her weepy pleading look on her admirers, of which her husband was obviously not one, at least that day.

All three men instantly responded. Who would expect Aphrodite to descend from her pedestal to attend to mere matters of missing chicken? Only, they all reasoned, her insensitive and undeserving husband. Tony was a pleasant enough chap, but hackles were easily roused when Leonora was around. Anything, anything they could do to help they would, in the hope of gratitude from the goddess.

"We've some chicken in the freezer," Richard said eagerly. "Pop home and get it, Jane darling."

Darling Jane did not budge. "Pop yourself," she replied pleasantly. Normally she'd be happy to oblige Tony, with whom she usually got on well, but today was not normal. Richard hesitated, but the implied message was clear: Stay right where you are.

"Quite right, Jane," Tony said approvingly, to irritate Leonora even more. "We've got some sausages somewhere."

"Sausages?" Leonora grew pale. "We can't just eat *sausages*."

"We've got some fish," Hector offered proudly. "Monkfish, naturally. Nothing but the best for our Leonora, eh?"

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The glacial Annabel froze even further. "Monkfish for a barbecue? Absolutely not."

The field was clear for the randy Patrick, but through no fault of his own, he fell at the first fence—almost literally. "Steak," he cried, running to the garden gate. "I'll fetch some steak."

"We ate it," Liz called after him smugly, and with a look of intense dislike he returned to the group.

Leonora looked horrified, and little wonder. What had gone wrong? Why wasn't her problem being solved for her? The other seven of the group instinctively knew. The warriors were taking up their positions. Kebabs might be the battleground, but Armageddon had been brewing for some time—and its root cause was not chicken.

The barbecue was the last of Manor Square's social events for the summer. When Lower Beeching's former infant school at one edge of the manor estate had been demolished in favour of a larger eggbox construction situated at the other end of the village, a developer had quickly seen the opportunity to build four prestigious residences in its place, complete with porticos, double garages, and latticed windows, and each on one side of a secluded inner square. Each had its own rear garden, which, owing to the angle of the houses, afforded some privacy. There were few prestigious houses in Little Beeching, and thus the four in Manor Square preserved their status by banding themselves into an exclusive social unit, indulging in frequent get-togethers, from barbecues to bridge, from dinner parties to dining out.

It had been a hot summer, and barbecues had been frequent. By the time of this last barbecue the sun was losing its power, but emotions were boiling hot in Tony and Leonora's garden. That these emotions should explode over a matter of chickens was unforeseen but immaterial; they were merely the means of ignition.

"Why don't you organise things properly, Leonora," Tony hurled at her, almost squeaking with pent-up rage, "instead of swanning around preening yourself? You're no spring chicken."

Sheer shock made Leonora—and her guests—speechless for a moment. Then tears began to roll down the flawless cheeks. "It's your fault," she wailed.

"How dare you speak to her that way!" Hector shouted, with Richard chiming in with a feeble, "Hey, calm down," and Patrick announcing that Tony was a jerk. "You don't appreciate her," Hector concluded indignantly.

"Which you obviously do," Annabel snapped unexpectedly. In her role as superior being, she usually strove to float serenely over any hint of strife. "You're a good judge, after all. You see enough of her."

Patrick immediately seized his opening. "Don't worry, Annabel, Hector doesn't have the balls to *do* anything about it."

Liz looked at her husband sharply. She might be hearty and healthy, but she had a shrewd brain in her head—and a keen eye. "But you do. You spend half your time mentally undressing her, and maybe not so mentally."

Richard joined in, with Jane hopping up and down anxiously at his side. "Let's calm it, shall we?"

Unfortunately, his sanctimonious plea had the opposite effect.

"Don't tell me you wouldn't want to do the same yourself, Rick," Patrick sneered, "if only Jane would let you—"

"Me?" Richard interrupted fiercely, with Jane now ready to enter the fray, boiling with righteous fury on behalf of her husband.

Both were frustrated, as Tony waved the huge tongs round his head then

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crashed them against the barbecue's metal side.

"Aren't you all forgetting something?" he yelled. "Leonora's *my* wife. And it's going to stay that way, whatever nasty little lusty thoughts you three might have. Isn't that right, Leonora?"

Leonora promptly ran to him, all rustling silk and dark passionate eyes, and kissed him gently on the lips. "Of course that's right, Tony. You're the only man in my life. I'd never leave you."

There was a silence, as several guests' fantasies were blown to smithereens. All six reluctantly acknowledged the truth. Not only was Tony a very rich man, but Leonora was a very moral woman. Whatever her own desires, and however she might fulfill them from time to time, she would stay with Tony.

Not for long, as it turned out. Two days later when Leonora was away visiting her parents, Tony was found seated in his car in a closed garage. He was dead from carbon monoxide poisoning.

Suicide? No note had been left for Leonora. Accident was theoretically possible. Tony wasn't known for alcoholic abstinence. Uneasily the remaining inhabitants of Manor Square, not to mention the police, leaned towards murder—influenced, no doubt, by the autopsy, which revealed not only a large quantity of alcohol but a heavy dose of barbiturates.

Despite village gossip, the murder was not mentioned publicly for some days in Manor Square. Each of the residents spoke individually to the police about what a good chap Tony was and how devoted a couple he and Leonora had been. There was mention of recent business worries and rivals. Leonora explained to the police that Tony had a habit of stirring up antipathy at work, although jealousy was not in his nature. Then all went quiet and Leonora received permission for the funeral to go ahead.

After the service and formal gathering, Leonora insisted that the other six Manor Square residents should remain for supper. "Since we're all so close," she explained, "I would appreciate it. I've made some chicken cacciatore."

Leonora was bearing up wonderfully, her guests all verbally agreed, unable to refuse. Not one of them commented on the last occasion that chicken had dominated the menu.

"Hunter's chicken," Leonora translated kindly, in case the Italian language was unknown to her neighbours. "I thought it would be a nice way to break the news to you."

News? Six faces looked up warily.

"After all," Leonora cooed sweetly, "we all know that one of you murdered Tony. So I thought I would tell you I shall be putting this house on the market immediately and moving away."

Horrified faces, hiding varying emotions, greeted her announcement.

"Don't," Richard said immediately in his accountant's I-know-what-is-wise-for-you voice. "It's too soon. Make no decision for at least six months."

It's doubtful if Leonora even heard him, for Patrick and Hector were falling over themselves to express their own shock—or perhaps each calculating his chances of going with her versus his career.

"You're going alone?" shrieked Patrick, causing Liz to choke over her chicken cacciatore.

"You can't do it yet," Hector was babbling.

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Only respect for widowhood prevented the women from shouting out: "Oh yes, you can, Leonora. *Do* it."

Hunter's chicken, but who was the hunter and who the prey? That was the interesting question. It was noticeable that none of the three men had questioned Leonora's statement that the murderer was sitting at the table with her.

Leonora took no notice of her guests' pleas. She had no need to. Her plans were already made. "I haven't told the police that I think poor Tony was deliberately killed. But I do think I should leave for all our sakes."

There was silence, and the chicken cacciatore was undeservedly neglected, as the two burning issues were given priority. Was she right about murder, and if so what evidence did she have and whom did she have in mind? Secondly—or firstly for several guests—was she leaving alone?

"Perhaps I expressed myself a little badly," she continued. "I merely meant that you all had the opportunity to kill him and that therefore I should be a little more helpful with the police so that they can—what's the phrase?—eliminate you from their enquiries."

She had expressed herself all too clearly. And yet, as they looked at her, she seemed just as desirable, just as beautiful, if somewhat remote. Perhaps it was merely the emotions that had been stirred by her announcement. The knowledge that she was now a free woman had excited them with emotions ranging from hope to deep fear. Leonora had cast her spell over Manor Square for too long for it to disappear so quickly, and for some of those present, fantasies were busy reassembling themselves that bliss could still be theirs. But the fantasies had taken on a dark hue; there was murder to be taken into account, a life unjustly ended and society's retribution to be considered.

"Why should anyone want to kill Tony?" Jane was brave enough to ask.

A lesser woman than Leonora might have been thrown by this, but she countered it immediately.

"Not *why*, Jane. That would be a distressing question even to consider. You know I love you all dearly." (This was news to some of her guests.) "Suppose we ask ourselves *how* it could have been done."

Oh, what subtlety. The guests examined their love or lack of it for Leonora, most assuming she spoke only to them.

"How indeed," Leonora continued. "I loved Tony so much, you see, and so I do feel the need to examine what happened carefully. He died in the early evening, although he was not found until nearly midnight—by you, Richard."

Richard flushed bright red, as if she were accusing him of the murder. He opened his mouth to protest, but she swept onwards.

"Tony," she continued, "had been intending to stay in that evening and watch a DVD. Could he have had a visitor? One of you, even? Of course he could. However—forgive me, for I'm not used to this kind of situation—it occurs to me that you would all have noticed if your spouse was absent for a fair while during the relevant period, say six to eight o'clock. I, as you know, was with my parents twenty miles away, and we were—" a small sigh— "dining in a local restaurant that evening. I'm sure you can't think that I would have any need of an alibi, but fortunately there were many witnesses. You all know how much I loved Tony. *Did* any of you notice your spouse's absence during the early evening?"

There was another horrified silence, and it went on so long that Leonora smiled. "So no one did. Do you know, that's what I imagined would be the case."

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It was Annabel who came to the aid of the party. "I think Jane's right. The *why* should come first. None of us had any business dealings with Tony, and you told the police that he was often at odds with his colleagues. That is by far the most likely reason *if* he was murdered." She threw down her gauntlet with aplomb. "After all, none of us had any personal reason to kill him, did they, Leonora?"

"Love is unpredictable," Leonora murmured, unfazed. She was made of stern stuff.

So was Annabel. "It is indeed, and so, much as you loved Tony, Leonora, you have to include yourself in this imaginary scenario of murder. You could have known Tony was planning to use his car that evening and drugged his whisky before you left."

Leonora looked shaken, but not very stirred. "Whisky? Rather chancy, don't you think, with today's drink-and-drive laws? Far more likely that someone here shared a most unfriendly coffee with him, then enticed him to the garage, engaging him in talk until the pills took effect?"

"But *why* should any of us do that, Leonora?" Annabel persisted, determined to bring her into the open.

Leonora lost some of her poise. "Someone must have believed I loved them," she said flatly.

"But you told us all very clearly at the barbecue that you loved only Tony," Annabel said sweetly.

"I did. Of course I did. It's a question of degree." Leonora looked flushed.

"Not putting all your eggs in one basket, eh?" Richard said. His tone seemed aimed at the jocular, but it didn't quite make it.

"Please don't talk of chickens," Leonora said stiffly poise recovered. "The anger, the hatred shown to poor Tony and myself that day—I shall never forget it. And you call yourselves our friends. I suspected then that Tony might be doomed." A pause. "Do you know who I think killed him?"

A stillness, as her glance travelled—vindictively—from one guest to another. "I believe one of you three couples did this together. One of you to share a drink with my poor husband, the other to summon him to the garage on some pretext and help overpower him if it were still necessary."

Something that might have been a collective sigh of relief ran round the table that Leonora, for all her fascination and loveliness, was not that bright.

Or was she? "But," she continued, "I admit the question of *why* does come into it. Why should *two* of you want to murder Tony, when love is such an individual thing?"

It was a question that none of them could answer, but nevertheless there was a strange quiet as the guests finished their chicken and the cheesecake that followed, and hastily departed for their own homes.

At Ash House, Patrick broke the long silence as Liz fussed around in the bathroom for far too long—almost as if she were delaying the inevitable moment. "Is Leonora right?" he said the moment she appeared. "Do you see Hector and Annabel in cahoots for long enough to murder old Tony? Or Richard and Jane? Bit far-fetched, isn't it?" He gave an uneasy laugh.

Liz's cheeks glowed with indignation. "I notice you don't add, 'Why should they want to?'"

Patrick paid great attention to removing his clothes for the night, perhaps in

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the hope of deflecting Liz's thoughts to matters he could more easily satisfy. She wasn't deflected.

"I could see Hector having a go alone," she added airily. "That woman's a tease. I wouldn't mind betting she egged him on with the promise of her luscious body—or is that what she's promised you? Either way," she ignored Patrick's attempts at refuting her accusations, "she hoped one of you would free her from her marital chains and make her a rich woman."

"You can be a bitch, Liz. You know that? You've really got it in for poor Leonora."

"No, darling. You have stars in your eyes and the hots elsewhere." Liz's eyes narrowed.

"Nonsense," Patrick said hurriedly. "I may flirt a bit, but you know it's nothing serious."

"Do I?"

"I think it's Richard and Jane Leonora's had in mind—or more likely Richard alone."

"No way. Jane wouldn't let him out of her sight long enough for more than a quick squeeze of the hand, much as he'd like to. I think," Liz reflected, "it's us whom Leonora was targeting. Or rather, you. After all, you were at the pub that evening."

Patrick said nothing as he climbed into bed.

"Jane—"

"Yes?" Her stony face made Richard nervous as he watched her come in with the cocoa.

"Do you think Leonora's right? That it's a couple working together?"

"If so, it isn't us," she said shortly. "I suppose it could be Liz and Patrick or Hector and Annabel, but it seems unlikely to me. Annabel and Liz are more likely to kill Leonora than Tony."

"Unless," Richard said thoughtfully, "Leonora, or Tony come to that, was blackmailing them."

Jane gasped. "What about, for heaven's sake?"

"I don't know. I suppose it's not very likely. Anyway, my money's on Patrick," Richard said quickly, "he's a funny sort of bloke, and Liz would cover up for him all the way. She's like that."

Jane raised an eyebrow. "There's you, of course," she said, stirring the cocoa, as well as the pitch of the conversation. She'd been longing to get that out all the evening. Richard had been far too quiet.

"You can't possibly think I murdered him," Richard said self-righteously. "You don't think I have my eye on Leonora."

"It's difficult not to," Jane said forthrightly. "She's stunning. Even I can see that."

"Admiring her is a far call from wanting to spend the rest of your life with her, or to murdering her husband," he said caustically. "Jane, you don't really think I—"

"Of course not," Jane interrupted quickly. "But that was your choir-practice evening, so I couldn't actually *swear* we were together."

"Darling," said Annabel, "what did you think about Leonora's terrible accusation?"

Hector, propped against the bed pillows, pretended to study the *Times* crossword. "You're not worrying about that, are you? She's been through a lot, poor little kitten. She was saying the first thing that came into her head, nonsense though it is."

"Kitten?" Annabel said drily, putting on her anti-wrinkle cream. "Cat, I'd say."

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"Now, now," Hector said uneasily, seeing a storm heading his way. "You ladies all get on with her so well at your ladies' meetings."

"Do we? She has her favourites there just as she does with you three macho men. I think she's been setting you up, Hector."

"What for?" Hector yelped, promptly abandoning the crossword.

"Chief suspect."

"Nonsense. Leonora loves—"

"Does she really, Hector? Does she really?" Annabel said coldly, as he blushed red. "I do wish, Hector, that you hadn't gone to that meeting that evening."

His eyes bulged. "Are you suggesting I popped in to murder old Tony on the way home?"

"Of course not," she murmured.

Leonora knew the truth all along. She lured me on, giving subtle hints as to how I might persuade Tony into the garage through the unobserved side door; something might just happen, she suggested, and then, if I played my cards right, we could be together forever. Well, was I the patsy! Leonora was never one to dirty herself with unnecessary work, so she set me up to do the job, knowing I wanted nothing more than to be with her. She gave me the barbiturates, left the coffee ready, knowing he would never refuse me if I told him my car was out of order and I needed a lift. I loved my neighbour's wife passionately, and stupidly believed she loved me too. So I killed Tony, knowing that to be the only way of obtaining what I had thought was both our hearts' desire.

Alas, my beloved and moral Leonora absconded as she had intended all along, but not with me. I had helped myself to her charms in vain. As Aesop so wisely pointed out: "Don't count your chickens before they are hatched."

Leonora left Lower Beeching with my husband Richard. ●

THE JURY BOX **(continued from p. 75)**

Rex Stout's first two Nero Wolfe novels, *Fer-de-Lance* (1934) and *The League of Frightened Men* (1935), have been reprinted together in a new trade paperback (Bantam, $15), with introductions by Loren D. Estleman and Robert Goldsborough respectively, affording an opportunity to discover (or rediscover) one of the great series of American detective novels.

In terms of sheer quality, it would be hard to find an anthology to top *Murder Short & Sweet* (Chicago Review Press, $19.95), edited by Paul D. Staudohar, whose introduction credits the importance of *EQMM* as a source for great stories. Old hands will find the contents overfamiliar, but anyone who has not read such classic tales as Thomas Burke's "The Hands of Mr. Ottermole," Roald Dahl's "Lamb to the Slaughter," Anthony Berkeley's "The Avenging Chance," Vincent Starrett's "The Eleventh Juror," or Lord Dunsany's "The Two Bottles of Relish" should amend that gap. Also included is comparably excellent material by such contemporaries as Brendan DuBois, Lawrence Block, Donald E. Westlake, Ruth Rendell, and most surprisingly, John Updike. Principal lack is any representation of the hardboiled school, and the gender balance skews male: only four of the 25 stories are by women (Christie, Sayers, Rendell, and Anthony Gilbert). ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

THE DAM

by Scott Loring Sanders

"All right, looks like we've got us a good morning," said George Benedict to the two men who had booked him for the day. It had been just under a week since everything had happened, but already he found himself back on the water. He had bills to pay, after all.

He couldn't help but feel anxious, though he did his best to hide it from his new clients. They were Kodak factory workers from Rochester who, it looked to George, had never been fishing, let alone salmon fishing, in their lives. George could always tell: They gripped their rods as awkwardly as a beginner to golf grips a club; their attire consisted of T-shirts, shorts, and flip-flops instead of jeans and boots; in their cooler they had no food, only beer, which, George conceded, was pretty typical of either the novice or veteran.

As they got started, the sun broke through the pines and yellowing leaves of the sycamores that lined the river, sending a zigzagging rivulet of orange over the smooth surface. George tightened his jacket, warding off the cool October air, and pushed the throttle handle. The stern dug into the water, parting it as cleanly as a filet knife splitting a fish belly. His clients, blasted by the breeze, immediately sought refuge in the galley.

"We had pretty good luck a few days ago, about two miles up," said George, raising his voice over the whip of the wind rushing through the door to the pilothouse. The men, who now sat around a laminated, circular table, had already decided to crack their first beers. George inadvertently twitched his

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nose as the sweet smell of the alcohol caught the breeze and slithered up his nostrils.

"Hey, Cap'n, you want one?" said Schmidt, the smaller of the two men. He rubbed the orange morning stubble along his jaw line as he spoke. "Ain't nothing like a beer for breakfast."

"No, thanks. It's a little early for me yet." George had stopped telling people ages ago that he'd quit drinking. He'd stopped telling them he'd been sober for over ten years. He had no interest in telling them that drinking had been the impetus for aggressive eruptions that had ruined his marriage, had cost him his job, had estranged him from his children. Thankfully, sobriety had been the answer; it had been the cork to stopper his bottle of violence.

"All right. That's just more for me and Schmitty," said the other man, Lou, searching for a laugh from his friend. He got it.

"So you say they've been biting pretty good lately?" asked Schmidt.

"We got six a few days back," lied George, "including a thirty-five pounder. Conditions are even better today."

That sent the pair to talking and laughing. George used the same line every time he took out a new group. He had found that the anticipation of what *might* happen was good for morale. More often than not, people didn't catch much. He had some good days, but those generally happened with clients who knew what they were doing.

When he approached the area where he thought the salmon might be running, he killed the engine and began showing the men how to rig the rods. "You'll be using J-Plugs. I don't mess with no live bait. Too messy. I'll troll upstream toward the dam, then sweep around. All you gotta do is sit here and wait."

Schmidt finished his can of beer and asked, "Are we gonna know they're on there? We gonna feel it?"

"These fish ain't a bunch of trout sipping on mayflies," said George. An unlit cigarette bounced in his lips as he spoke. "You'll feel it. That rod'll bend like a willow switch around a boy's ass. Let 'em take it, count to three, then give it all you got. Jack that jaw."

"Oh yeah, Schmitty," said Lou, rubbing his hands together as if warming them. "I'm gonna rip their damn lips off."

"I'm ready. I wanna bring home some dinner to the old lady," said Schmidt. "Let's catch a couple of those dumb bastards."

"They didn't get to be forty pounds by being stupid," said George, casually lighting his cigarette with his Zippo.

Monofilament whirred off the reels as the two men cast their J-Plugs from the stern. After the lures hit the water, they tightened their lines and stuck the butts

Scott Loring Sanders made his fiction debut in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories in January of 2006 with the story "Fresh Falling Snow." He's been busy since then, earning a creative-writing fellowship to the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, and selling two novels to Houghton Mifflin, the first of which, a crossover young adult/adult book, *The Hanging Woods*, received a glowing review from *Kirkus*. Readers of all ages should watch for the next book, *Gray Baby*, in Spring of '09.

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of the rods into the stainless-steel holders. They pulled their cooler of beer between them and grabbed a fresh one, then each took a seat in a swivel chair.

"To good friends, a day off, and big fish," said Schmidt, raising his can in one hand while tipping the bill of his grease-smudged Yankees cap with the other.

"Hell yeah," said Lou. "I'll drink to that." He clicked his can to Schmidt's and both began drinking.

After trolling for twenty minutes, neither of the men had yet had a strike. George thought about moving upstream a ways, closer to the dam, where he knew the bigger salmon would be, but he was still nervous about things. He was already within a couple of miles of it and that was close enough for him.

The sun's head topped the trees, and a faint, ghostly fog started to burn off the water. George loved this time of morning, when everything began to awaken. A pair of beavers were already at work, collecting mud and sticks near a tiny stream that fed into the Genesee. A blue heron stood stock-still on the edge of the far shore, scanning for baitfish. George focused on it, knowing that the bird, at least, would have no trouble catching a meal. He tuned out his clients completely and watched the heron patiently work the shallows, its long, pointed beak piercing the water's skin as it hunted. George stared at the bird, the water, the green rushes, while playing the horrific incident over in his mind.

"Cap'n?" said Schmidt, suddenly standing next to George at the helm. It startled him, breaking him from his dark reverie. "I said, What's that over there? Looks like something."

George looked in the direction of Schmidt's pointing finger. A group of gulls were in a feeding frenzy about forty yards to the port side.

"Just a dead salmon. You see it all the time."

"*We* don't see it all the time. How about taking us over there? We'd like to check it out. We wanna see what we'll be catching."

"All right," said George, turning the wheel and shaking his head. He was anxious but what were the odds? "It's your money."

He swung the boat around and headed toward the gulls. The birds rose and fell over the carcass like puffs of cooking popcorn; they hovered before they dived, fighting and squawking as they struggled for a piece of the salmon's flesh.

"Looks like a big one," said Lou.

"Yeah," said Schmidt, "but you can't tell for sure with all them birds."

"They'll scatter in just a second," said George. "Soon as we get a little closer." He aimed the bow at the flock. The gulls dispersed, just as George had said, and circled over the boat, angry and screaming for having their meal interrupted. He pulled alongside so the men could get a good look. The stench was overwhelming.

"Holy shit, Cap'n," said Schmidt. "That ain't no salmon."

George hadn't even planned on going out that morning. He didn't have anything booked, so he was just going to do some routine maintenance and a tuneup, but then the young man had showed up, seemingly out of nowhere. It had been early morning, still dark, and George was on deck, bent over the outboard engine, a penlight clenched between his teeth, when the guy about scared the shit out of him.

"You George Benedict?" he said, standing on the floating dock next to the boat.

"Jesus Christ," said George as the little flashlight fell to the floor and he

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straightened up faster than he cared to, feeling every single day of his fifty-one years. He turned around and looked up to see the faint outline of a large man eclipsing one of the marina's floodlights.

"Sorry," said the man. "Didn't mean to scare you."

George reached down, picked up his light, and pointed it at the man. He wasn't more than a kid really, probably early twenties, and wore a checkered Elmer Fudd hat, the flaps hanging down over his ears. He was bundled in a heavy ski parka and had knock-knees and a fat baby face. George figured he must have weighed two hundred sixty or more. At the moment, he was in the midst of chewing on a bagel that was wrapped in a piece of waxed paper.

"Yeah, I'm George. Who wants to know?"

"Well," said the man, still chewing vigorously, "my name's Bryan Mulleny. My dad owns Mulleny Motors. You've probably heard of him."

"I've seen the commercials," said George, picturing the loud, obnoxious ads, already convinced that he didn't like this Bryan kid. He reached for a spark plug wrench in his toolbox and turned back toward the engine.

"I want to go fishing. I heard you're the best."

"I can take you sometime," said George, setting down the wrench and pulling out his little datebook from the inside pocket of his coat, "but not today." Whether he liked the kid or not didn't matter. If his dad owned Mulleny Motors, then that meant money. He shined his penlight on the pages to see what he had available. "Looks like anytime this week except Friday or Saturday will work. Three hundred for a half-day, four hundred for a whole."

"I'm talking about going right now," said Bryan. "Do you have anything booked for today?"

"Now? I didn't have no plans of going today. This is a maintenance day. She needs a little tuneup."

Bryan finished the last of the bagel, balled the wax paper, and tossed it toward a drum sitting on the dock. It missed, rebounding off the side and falling into the dark water. He didn't seem to notice, or if he did, he didn't seem to care. Though his face was partially shadowed, the marina lights illuminated it just enough to show that "no" wasn't an answer he was used to.

"I'll pay you double. I've got the money," he said as his bulky arm reached behind him and struggled to pull out his wallet from his jeans pocket. The nylon shell of his jacket made a bothersome rubbing sound as he fumbled around.

He didn't look like the kind of guy who had money. He wasn't dressed like it, at least. Usually George could tell, and his prices often fluctuated depending.

"See," said Bryan, "here's seven hundred bucks for a whole day." He fanned out seven crisp bills in front of George like a magician with a deck of cards.

George glanced at the money, then reached into his pocket for his pack of cigarettes. "Double would be eight hundred," he said, then rolled his Zippo over his pants and lit up.

"You drive a hard bargain," said Bryan, smiling. When he smiled, fat folds of skin hung over his soft jaws like the jowls of a hound dog. His chin had disappeared completely. He pulled out another bill and offered the turkey-tail of hundreds to George.

George accepted the money, folded it over, and stuck it in his coat along with his datebook and cigarettes. He blew out a cloud into the chilly morning, still amazed, after all these years, by what some people were willing to pay to try and

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catch a fish. "Well, hop aboard, partner. Let's go fishing. We got six a few days back, including a thirty-five pounder. Conditions should be even better today."

"Jesus," said Schmidt. "What the hell are we gonna do?"

George stared at the corpse as it floated, thinking of what appropriate action to take. He felt like kicking himself right in the ass for ever steering the boat over to the body in the first place. Like a breaching whale, only the back of the man broke the water; the rest hung limp just below the surface in an apropos dead-man's float. The odor was overwhelming. George found a bandanna in his pocket and tied it around his neck, then pulled it up to cover his nose and mouth.

"Damn, what're you gonna do, rob him?" asked Schmidt. "You look like Jesse James, Cap'n." He looked over at Lou, who laughed—nervously.

"This ain't no time to be dicking around," yelled George, Schmidt's comment hitting closer to home than the man would ever know. "For Christ's sake, we got a floater in the water and you're standing there cracking jokes?"

Schmidt retreated like a puppy caught chewing on a corner-piece of furniture. "Sorry, Cap'n," he muttered. Lou followed Schmidt's lead, dropping his eyes to the deck, his head hangdog.

The corpse gently slapped against the hull of the boat as it swayed with the mild ripples. A blue, bloated hand rose to the surface momentarily, as if waving to the men, before disappearing back into the dark water. Incessant chattering from the gulls continued overhead. The hand rose again, waving.

"You think it might be that rich car kid who's been missing?" asked Lou, trying to avert his eyes from the body, though the fascination to sneak peeks was overwhelming.

"I was thinking the same thing," said Schmidt. "News said it's been like four or five days, I think."

"Five," said George.

"Well, anyway, what do you think we should do?" asked Schmidt. "We could use that gaff you got and pull him on deck."

George scowled at Schmidt, though Schmidt didn't realize it because of the red mask covering George's face. "Are you out of your mind? I'm not pulling that stinky son of a bitch aboard. It'd take me weeks to get rid of that smell." George couldn't help but flash back to how long it had taken to get the boat cleaned up. Blood had found its way into every corner, every recess of the deck. It didn't seem like it would ever go away. "Just think how bad he's stinking right now, and he's still in the water. We put him on this boat and that stench is liable to knock us all out."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," said Schmidt. He took off his T-shirt, wadded it into a ball, and covered his face. Lou did the same.

George stood for a moment, trying to figure how he could work this current situation to his advantage. Maybe finding the body wasn't such a bad thing after all. When was the last time a killer had delivered a body right to the police? George felt sure that bringing a victim to the authorities' doorstep would have to alleviate suspicion. "Open up that hatch. I got a little twenty-pound anchor in there. I guess we'll tie him up and pull him back."

George had heard that a lot of fish had been taken near the dam lately, though none of his recent clients had had any luck. But he figured with as much money

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as the kid had just handed over, he might as well give it a shot. Now he could certainly afford the extra gas he'd have to burn to get there. It took twenty-five minutes at a steady thirty-knot clip before the mammoth concrete dam came into view. They both stared in awe at the two-hundred-foot wall holding back millions of gallons of water.

"My grandfather helped build the Mount Morris Dam," said Bryan, chewing on a Baby Ruth. He seemed to have a whole picnic basket stuffed under his ski parka; he'd been pulling out food since they first set out.

"Is that so?" said George through his teeth as he bit the end of a piece of fishing line after setting up a rig.

"Yep, he was one of the head engineers with the Army Corps," said Bryan. He finished the last of his candy bar and dropped the wrapper on the deck. "If it wasn't for Pawpaw, that thing would never have gotten built. That's what Dad always used to say, anyway."

"Uh-huh," said George, not paying the least bit of attention. That is, not paying the least bit of attention until he spied the discarded candy wrapper as he made his way back to the helm. "Pick that up," he said. "My boat ain't your trash can."

Bryan was busy licking his fingers and didn't make a move. "Hey, the customer's always right. Isn't that what they say?"

"It ain't what I say," said George, tightening his jaw.

"I just paid you a lot of money. I don't think one little wrapper is going to hurt you."

"Pick that goddamned thing up off my deck or I swear to God there's going to be a man overboard in about two seconds." George was already at the end of his rope and Bryan hadn't even made his first cast yet. The whole ride toward the dam had been nothing but unremitting chatter about the new Hummer his father had given him for his twenty-first birthday, about the trips to the Bahamas he'd taken to go bone fishing, about how if the poor of Rochester would just get off their butts and look for work, the whole welfare problem would solve itself.

Bryan reached down, grabbed the wrapper, and was about to toss it into the water when he saw George's eyes bearing down on him. He crumpled it and stuck it in his pocket instead.

Over the course of the next several hours, George trolled in the shadows of the looming dam, but Bryan never had a strike.

"You know, in the Bahamas most of the captains have a policy that if you don't catch a bone fish, they give you half your money back."

"Well, this is New York and there ain't no such policy," said George. He reached in his coat and pulled out his cigarettes.

"And the captain at least brings sandwiches and drinks for his clients. Oh, shoot, I'm stuck again."

For the third time in the last hour, Bryan had managed to get his line caught in the propeller of the outboard engine. George took the wooden paddle that he always kept on board for emergencies and reached over the gunwale. With the flat end, he fumbled with the line until he got the J-plug free. He tossed it back into the water and said, "You're clear. And just to remind you, I didn't need to make no damn sandwiches when I didn't have no one booked."

"Well, still, you'd think you'd have something to eat on board. What if you broke down and got stranded out here? I haven't seen another boat in hours."

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"That's because they ain't biting today," said George, taking a long drag off his cigarette. He gazed at the hulking presence of the dam and said, "I'll happily take you on back."

"No, I want to get my money's worth. I'm just hungry, that's all." He reached into his inside coat pocket and searched around until he extracted a package of peanut-butter crackers. He opened them and began eating, not bothering to offer one to George. "In the Bahamas, usually you don't have time to eat anyway because you're too busy catching fish."

"Is that right?" said George, leaning slightly on the dripping paddle like an old man with a cane. He pulled the cigarette from his lips and exhaled out the side of his mouth.

Schmidt opened the hatch door, retrieved the anchor wrapped with fifty feet of yellow nylon rope, and handed it to George. The body stayed near the hull, almost magnetically, as if it gained some sort of comfort by sticking close to the boat's side; as if it recalled being on board just a few days before and wanted to get back on.

George calmly unwound the rope while letting the anchor sway back and forth over the water like a hypnotist's watch. He then pitched the steel across the corpse, though it fell a little shy, hitting the dead man's back before dropping into the water. The cadaver turned on its side for an instant, revealing a swollen, indiscernible face. Then it rolled back over, weeble-wobbling like a buoy. Deep gashes of pink on its neck, where the gulls had been pecking away, caught the soft light of the morning sunshine. The wounds gleamed in sharp contrast to the blue of the dead man's ski parka.

"All right, now grab the boat hook from in there," said George, holding the yellow cord in one hand while pointing to a long compartment with the other. "It's in that other hatch. Once you get it, try and go underneath the stiff and hook the rope. After you snag it, you're gonna have to toss the anchor over him again. And then keep doing it. Wrap him like a spider does a fly. Got me?"

"Yeah, I got you," said Schmidt. He removed the lengthy boat hook, which looked like an elongated fire poker, from the hatch and tried to snag the rope attached to the anchor.

After several failed attempts, George said, "Give me the goddamned thing." He handed the nylon cord to Schmidt and grabbed the boat hook. Not so accidentally, he stuck the corpse several different times with the sharp point of the gaff. Tissue and small chunks of skin frittered away in the water like saturated bread in a duck pond. He finally hooked the anchor and flipped it over the body—a process he repeated several times until it felt secure.

When he had the corpse wrapped tight, George took the end of the rope and tied it with a hitch knot to a steel ring at the stern. Then he went to the helm. "I'll need you men to keep an eye on him. If we lose him, we'll have to do it all over again. That is, if he don't sink with the extra weight of that anchor."

Lou nodded.

"You got it, Cap'n," said Schmidt. "And you know, judging by his size, I'm starting to think more and more that he just might be that car kid."

"He looked pretty big in all the pictures in the paper," said Lou.

"Wouldn't that be some shit, Cap'n? If we found that missing car kid?"

George looked straight ahead and said, "Yeah, that'd be some shit."

"What's fifty thousand divided by three?" asked Lou.

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"That's like twenty grand apiece," said Schmidt. "Hey, Cap'n, what would you do with your share if this happens to be him?"

George pushed the throttle forward but kept it at a low speed as they set off. Though it was subtle, he felt the drag of the corpse—only a captain who really knew his boat would have ever noticed.

"What're you talking about?" grumbled George.

"Last night, on the news, there was an interview with the father. That Mulleny guy who owns all the car lots. Said he was offering a fifty-thousand-dollar reward for any information that led to the return of his son. So what would you do with your part?"

George looked off at the cloudless blue sky and the magnificent colors changing around him. All of the anxiety, all of the trepidation that had been eating away at him dissipated to some degree. "Guess I'd retire. Maybe head to the Keys. Or the Bahamas or something. I hear the bone fishing's pretty good."

"Hell yeah," said Schmidt. "The Keys have got all kinds of good bars down there."

"Yeah, lots of bars," said Lou. "But lots of queers, too."

George increased his speed by a notch as he pondered and fantasized over his options.

"Listen, we ought to be heading back before too long," said George. "It'll be dark soon and clearly they ain't hungry today."

"Unlike your paying client," said Bryan, "who is starved. But as long as there's light, I want to fish. I paid for a whole day, I want to fish for a whole day."

George wondered what particular god he'd pissed off to deserve this. "I'll give you another half-hour. I'll use the trolling motor and slowly head toward the marina, then I gotta fire up the big mother and get back. Once that sun disappears, it'll start getting cool quick."

"Oh, shoot, you're gonna kill me," said Bryan, holding the point of the rod over the rear gunnel. "I think I got it all tangled up again."

George walked to the stern, grabbed the paddle, and tried to lift the line away from the prop, but Bryan had really managed to foul things up this time. The line had wrapped and twisted itself into a complicated bird's nest. George used the paddle to try and free things for the next five minutes, then frustratingly pulled and prodded on the line with his calloused bare hands to no avail. He needed the needle-nose pliers from his toolbox to clean things up, then he wanted to get the hell home and be finished with the nightmare.

As George turned around, Bryan stood by the side of the boat, his jeans and boxer shorts dropped to his ankles. A flood of anger quickly grew inside of George until the rage boiled with such pressure that nothing could hold it back. Before George realized that Bryan was only relieving himself and wasn't doing anything lecherous, he hit him in the back of the neck with the edge of the paddle as if swinging for the fence. The wooden paddle acted like an axe blade as it bit into the fatty skin just below his Elmer Fudd hat. Bryan crumpled and blood immediately oozed from the gash, snaking over the deck like a lazy crimson river.

George, having no control over what he'd just done, panicked. He took the blade and struck two more times until the end of the paddle splintered and the heavy gurgling of Bryan's labored breath ceased. George sat down in his captain's chair, still holding the end of the paddle, and gazed at the blank wall of the dam. He breathed heavily as he looked around for any signs of witnesses. It was

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nearly dusk and there was no other boat on the water. Up above, on the dam, he saw nothing. No maintenance people, no caretakers, no operators, no nothing. George felt an overwhelming sense of calm as he pulled up Bryan's drawers, then fingered the leather wallet in the back pocket. While he patiently waited for darkness, the wall of the dam turned a comforting shade of fire-orange as the sun cast its final light for the day.

Once George realized that the body trailing behind the boat seemed secure, he decided to notify the Coast Guard. He got on his radio, gave his name and boat information, and then explained the situation.

"I've got a body. Found it a few miles from the dam."

The static-filled, muffled voice came back a moment later, crackling over George's speaker. "Don't touch it. Give us the coordinates and stay with the body. We'll send someone out immediately."

George looked at Schmidt, who turned his head and smiled. "It's a little too late for that," said George into the transmitter. He smiled back at Schmidt, though the bandanna masked the grin. "I've got him tied off the stern and I'm en route."

"That's a negative," replied the voice. "Leave the body where it is. Don't touch it. I repeat, don't touch the body."

"Negative. I'm bringing him in. I'll be at the Kodak plant in forty-five minutes."

The excited voice began again, but George snapped off the radio. He pulled the bandanna from his face and fumbled in his pocket for his cigarettes. He tapped one partially out and lipped it from the pack. "Goddamn, it's been one hell of a week," he mumbled, rolling the wheel of the lighter against the coarse texture of his jeans. He looked back over his shoulder. A stream of foamy whitewater trailed off the dead man as he tumbled in the wake's sunken depression, bouncing along like cans attached to the bumper of a newlywed's car. The gulls followed, keeping tabs on their moving meal. George nodded toward the cooler and said to Schmidt, "You mind if I get one of those?"

Schmidt jumped up from his swivel chair. "Not at all, Cap'n. I was just thinking the same thing." He reached into the cooler and brought out two cans of beer. He cracked one for George and handed it to him.

Cold drops of moisture rolled down the side of the can, collecting on the tips of George's fingers. He removed the dangling cigarette from his lips, squinting as the smoke burned his eyes, and took a long pull from the can. Memories of the good old days flooded him. He was inundated with a happiness he hadn't felt in years—a release, like a razor blade letting a blister.

"So you say it's a fifty-thousand-dollar reward?"

"That's right," said Schmidt. "Hell, if we gotta find a dead body, we might as well get something for it. I sure hope it's the missing car kid."

"Yeah, me too," said George. He took another drink, crossed his arms, and closed his eyes. He turned his face toward the sun, relishing the taste he'd never forgotten, then increased the speed by another notch as he steered the boat toward the Kodak plant. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see what happens," he said, chugging the beer down in a few swallows. "You mind if I get one more?"

"Sure thing," said Schmidt. "We got plenty."

"Good. I got a feeling I'm gonna need 'em," said George as he cracked open the new can and took another long swallow, preparing himself for whatever was about to come. ●

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THE ALEXANDRIAN SOLUTION

by Edward D. Hoch

This new story by Edward D. Hoch is the last original tale he completed for *EQMM*. We saved it for the final issue of the year in which we lost the great short story writer and friend of this magazine. Ed Hoch's 35-year-plus streak of unbroken publication in *EQMM* will continue for a few months as we bring you some of his stories that have appeared elsewhere. But we salute him here and now for all the wonderful stories, including this last, that he wrote for us. ¶

"My father was sometimes called the Wizard of Time," the bearded man told Rand and Leila. "You can see why."

Indeed they could. Rosco Mathers was seated behind an ancient desk with intricately carved legs, surrounded by timepieces of every sort. Several were on the wall above his head, while twin grandfather clocks stood like sentinels behind him. An hourglass rested on the desk itself, where some men might have had a cigar humidor or a computer monitor.

"We can see that you like clocks," Leila remarked, "even though none of them seem to be going. Why are they all stopped at different times?"

"One of my many idiosyncrasies," he answered with a smile.

Rand nodded. "But I'm wondering why you invited my wife and me to visit you."

Rosco Mathers continued smiling. "I heard you were visiting here. Do you come to Egypt often?"

"Every few years. Leila had an Egyptian father and was raised here. Usually we go to Cairo but we decided to visit Alexandria this time."

"And I understand you were once a cipher expert with British Intelligence."

"That was many years ago. It seems as if I've been retired for a lifetime."

"But you've written books and occasionally given lectures. You have stayed current with espionage work."

"It's all different from my day. Ciphers are generated by computer now."

"You still know a great deal about them. You must be skilled at deciphering messages of the more traditional sort. I have a message I need deciphered."

Rand shrugged. "It's been years since I did any work like that."

Leila agreed. "We're just here on a vacation. We want to visit the Graeco-Roman Museum."

"And so you should," the bearded man agreed. "The museum contains many artifacts from our ancient Alexandrian civilization, combining the cultures of Egypt, Greece, and Rome."

"But you're not Egyptian, not with a name like Rosco Mathers," Leila observed.

"Certainly not! My father was on the embassy staff in Cairo thirty years ago and I was brought up here. When he retired and returned to England I decided to remain here."

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"In Alexandria rather than Cairo."

"Of course. It is the city founded by Alexander the Great, site of the greatest library in the ancient world. Today it remains Egypt's largest port, handling sixty percent of the nation's imports and exports. The days of the money changers and hashish sellers are giving way to a new century's international commerce."

"Where is the message you want me to look at?" Rand asked, seeing no way out of it at this point.

"Right here." Mathers passed Rand a square of onion-skin paper that had been folded many times to fit into a tiny space.

Rand saw at once that it was a numbers cipher, divided into five-digit groups that stretched across the page in several columns. He was reminded of a standard Soviet spy cipher used during World War II. He might be able to solve it, given a few hours. "I can try," he said. "I won't promise anything. If I can't solve it this afternoon, I'll return it to you."

"Very well," Rosco Mathers told him. "Naturally I'll pay you for your time. I'm just thankful you were in the city when I needed you. I will phone your hotel later to see how you're progressing."

Rand and his wife were at the Cecil Hotel overlooking the vast Midan Saad Zaghlul square near the beach, because even in advanced middle age Leila still loved the water. When he'd first met her, many years earlier, she was an archeologist searching for tombs in the polluted Nile River. "So much of Egypt is dusty," she told him then. "I like to wash it off me as often as possible."

Someone had told Mathers they were staying at the Cecil and he'd recognized Rand's name from his book on cipher technology. They'd responded to the invitation to visit Mathers at his office right across the square, where modern architecture stood in stark contrast to the museums, mosques, and monuments of past centuries. Now they returned to their hotel, where Rand set about breaking the cipher.

"I believe I'll do a bit of shopping," Leila told him. "There's no sense both of us wasting an afternoon while you ponder over that thing."

"The man's father was the Wizard of Time, after all," Rand told her with a touch of irony. "He deserves some special treatment."

"But what does he do with all those clocks? What does he do, period?"

"Perhaps if I can decipher this, we'll know."

"You seem quite confident that you will."

"If it's the old Soviet cipher with a grid using two numbers for each letter, it'll be fairly simple to crack. Come back in an hour or two. I'll know more then."

Rand cleared off the hotel room's desk and started working. It brought back fond—and not so fond—memories of his long hours of toil when he headed up the Department of Concealed Communications for British Intelligence. After a few false starts he thought something was beginning to emerge. This being Egypt, he was fairly certain the message would be in Arabic, English, or French. He saw that he was correct when English words began to emerge. The use of an old Soviet cipher meant simply that the sender had probably been in Egypt in the early 1970s when Soviet advisors were stationed there.

He'd finished about half the job, enough to know that a shipment of arms was involved, when Leila returned with a shopping bag. "I see you found something," he greeted her from the desk.

"I found something, all right! One of the little shops had a most unusual clock, and I asked the proprietor if she knew Rosco Mathers, whose father was the

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Wizard of Time. She said she'd known him quite well and had been devastated by his death."

"What?"

Leila nodded. "She attended his funeral two weeks ago."

Rand began to wonder what he'd gotten himself into. "I believe I'd like to speak with that woman," he told Leila.

"Certainly. I'll take you there myself."

"Is that where the shopping bag came from?"

She nodded and held it up: The name of the shop in English was The Alexandrian Solution. "Cute name, isn't it?"

Rand grunted. "Let's go see this woman."

The shop was just off the hotel lobby, a small place that seemed to feature snakeskin shoes and purses, along with necklaces that ended in intricate knots and even the cowled heads of cobras. The trim middle-aged woman behind the counter smiled when she recognized Leila. "You've come back with your husband!"

"That's me," Rand admitted.

"I'm Irene Duggen. You have a charming wife."

"I think so, too."

"I shudder when I see those cobras," Leila remarked. "I forget that Alexandria is cobra country."

The woman laughed at that. "Why? Because Cleopatra killed herself here with the bite of an asp? I doubt very much that you will see any snakes on your visit, unless you wander through the farmlands after dark, especially near the water."

"You told Leila that Rosco Mathers died two weeks ago," Rand said. "I was under the impression we had a meeting with him just this morning."

"What did this man look like?" she asked.

"Probably in his fifties, with a bushy black beard and thinning hair on his head."

She shook her head. "Rosco had no beard."

"He might have grown one," Leila suggested.

"Not after he was dead. Whoever met with you this morning was an imposter."

"How did Mathers die?" Rand asked.

"His body was recovered from the sea last month. It was a suspicious death, possibly murder. A terrible tragedy."

"The police don't know who did it?"

"His body wasn't found for several days. It may have been robbery, though his wallet and cash weren't taken."

Rand had another question. "What sort of work did Mathers do? He had all those clocks in his office."

He thought she blushed a bit at the mention of the clocks. "Those were his father's. The old man operated a string of brothels in the city during the late 'forties, just after the war. Each of the women had a clock of some sort in her room to keep track of the customer's time limit. When many of the brothels closed and his father died, Rosco kept the clocks as office decorations. As for his business, he simply referred to it as import-export, which could mean almost anything."

A young Egyptian man came into the shop from the back room, carrying some boxes. "Where do you want these, Irene?"

"Better leave them in the back room for now. This is my clerk, Nessim. These people are interested in Rosco Mathers."

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Nessim, an Egyptian with a pleasant smile, bobbed his head to acknowledge them. "He was a popular man. No one would want him dead."

"Did you know him well?"

"He handled some of our European exports," Irene Duggen explained, not really answering his question.

"We were there just once," Rand said. "All those clocks impressed me."

"The newspaper ran an article about him last month," Nessim told them. "He was well known in the city."

"An article? With a picture?"

Nessim nodded. "Yes, there was a picture."

When they left The Alexandrian Solution, Leila remarked, "I assume you won't be getting paid now for your little decoding job."

"I suppose not," Rand agreed. "But I'm so close to the end I might as well finish it. I would like to see a photo of Mathers, though, just to make sure I wasn't hired by a ghost."

"Maybe tomorrow I can look for that newspaper photo. They must have a library here that carries those things."

He worked on the cipher for a few hours and it was just before the dinner hour when he put down his pencil with a sigh. "Let's get something to eat," Leila said, sensing his frustration. "I can see it's not as simple as you expected."

"There's something missing, apparently a list of numbers. This is only half the message."

"Well, I don't suppose a dead man would need the whole thing."

"The man we saw in that office this morning was a long way from dead, whatever his name was."

The phone in their room rang and Leila answered it. She spoke softly for a moment and then hung up. "That was the desk. A police captain is on his way up to see us."

"What for?"

"Concerning Rosco Mathers."

Captain Simbel was a slender man with black hair and a moustache, his skin the pale brown color Rand often saw in Egypt. He removed his peaked cap as he entered. His polite introduction and show of credentials lasted only a moment and then he asked, "Mr. Rand, what is your connection with Rosco Mathers?"

"He phoned me here yesterday and requested that I come to his office this morning. He wished to hire me for a brief bit of work."

Simbel's eyes shifted to Leila and then back to Rand. "And you called on him?"

"Both of us did."

He produced a small photograph which he handed to Rand. "Was this the man you met?" The photograph had obviously been taken at Mathers's desk, probably the one the newspaper had used. His array of clocks was the backdrop, all carefully set at twenty minutes after eight.

"No. He had a beard and appeared older than this man."

"This is the real Rosco Mathers. The man you met was an imposter. What was it he asked you to do?"

"Decode a message. I did that sort of work in my younger days."

"Do you have it?"

"I haven't quite finished it yet," Rand told him.

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"The real Mathers was a well-known businessman in the import-export business. His body was recovered two weeks ago from the Mediterranean."

"I know that now."

"Do you have any idea how this imposter gained access to Mathers's office?"

"I suppose it wouldn't be too difficult to pick a lock. Did he have relatives or someone who might take over the business?"

Captain Simbel pursed his lips, perhaps weighing just how much to tell Rand. "There's a brother, Frederick Mathers. I spoke with him after Rosco's death. At the time, he didn't know what would become of the business. There were only a few people employed there and he'd let them all go."

"Did Rosco have a wife?"

"They were divorced. She has a gift shop in the lobby of this hotel."

Leila gasped at the news. "Not The Alexandrian Solution?"

"That's the place, yes."

"Her name is Irene Duggen. She seems to be British."

"Why does that surprise you? Rosco Mathers was British also."

"It's just that—" Leila hesitated. "When she told us he was dead she didn't mention that she was his ex-wife."

"But she did tell you she attended his funeral," Rand reminded her. Then, to Captain Simbel, he said, "Do you have any leads on who killed him?"

"None. It was perhaps an attempted robbery, though his wallet and money were still on the body."

"But you remain interested in the case."

"He was a wealthy and important businessman, one of Alexandria's leading citizens." Simbel picked up his cap and indicated that the interview was over. He handed Rand his card. "You will contact me if you hear from this imposter again."

"Of course."

When they were alone Leila commented, "That seemed like more than a casual interview."

Rand agreed. "Let's go to dinner before there's a further interruption."

In the morning, after breakfast, Leila decided she really wanted to visit the Graeco-Roman Museum. Rand suggested meeting her for lunch so he could finish work on the cipher. "Maybe it'll tell us something we don't know."

"Meet me at noon by the museum entrance. They might have an eating place right there."

Back in the room he waited while the chambermaid cleaned up and made the beds, then settled down to the last few lines of the cipher. He'd been at it only a few minutes when the phone at his elbow rang. When he answered it, a familiar voice said, "Mr. Rand? This is Rosco Mathers. I'm calling to see if you've completed that little task for me."

Rand had no experience speaking to dead men on the telephone, but he reminded himself that this Mathers was merely the imposter he'd met the previous day. "Yes, it's finished."

"Splendid! If you can deliver it here to my office I'll pay you for your time."

The money meant very little to Rand, but he wanted to meet with the imposter one more time. "I'll be over in a half-hour."

As on their previous visit, there was no receptionist at the reception room desk. Rand knocked at the door of the inner office and called out Mathers's name but there was no reply. He tried the knob and the door swung open. The man he'd

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known as Mathers was slumped in the chair before the wall of clocks with their identical times. He was covered in fresh blood. His throat had been slashed.

Rosco Mathers had been killed for the second time.

Rand wasted no time. Using his handkerchief in an attempt to preserve any fingerprints, he lifted the phone and called Captain Simbel. The first police arrived within minutes, and Simbel himself was on the scene a short time later. He took one look at the slashed throat of the victim and nodded. "The Alexandrian Solution."

"What—?"

"Did he phone you?"

Rand nodded. "At my hotel room, shortly after my wife left. He wanted to know if I'd finished with the cipher and I told him I had. I said I'd be here in a half-hour."

"He seems to have been killed with a large knife, perhaps even a sword. The arc of bloodstains indicates the killer probably stood across the desk from him and swung the weapon before the victim could protect himself."

"Any idea who he was?"

"Not Rosco Mathers."

Simbel's men seemed to be in charge and Rand asked if he could leave. "I've told you everything I know."

"Certainly. I will walk outside with you."

The street was alive with traffic and a crowd of bystanders attracted by the police presence. "Do you think it was a robbery?" Rand asked Simbel.

"I doubt it. The most valuable things in the office are probably those clocks, and they were untouched."

"What did you mean by 'the Alexandrian solution'? "

The police captain sighed. "Did you ever hear of the Gordian Knot?"

"A knot so complicated no one could untie it?" He remembered the knotted necklaces at Irene Duggen's shop.

"Exactly. Legend has it that Alexander the Great was told whoever undid it would rule the entire Near East. He cut the knot in two with a stroke of his sword. Some speak of it as the Alexandrian Solution—solving a difficult situation with a single decisive stroke."

"And you think that's what the killer did?"

"It seems more than likely."

"And Irene Duggen's shop of that name?"

He shrugged. "Simply a clever name for a gift shop in this city." Rand was about to part company when Simbel asked, "Did you finish decoding the message?"

"Mostly, yes."

"At this point that becomes police evidence. Hand it over, please."

Rand saw little point in arguing about it. He took the folded paper from his pocket. "It's a relatively simple numbers cipher, with the message in five-number groups. Happily it was in English, probably because Mathers was English."

Simbel took the message and its translation from Rand and read it quickly. "What is this? It makes no sense."

"It appears that Rosco Mathers was selling arms through his import-export business. This message confirms the impending arrival of weapons on a container ship out of South America."

"Alexandria is our country's largest port. Much cargo passes through here daily. There are really two harbors, with the west harbor used for commercial

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shipping. Its Zone Four handles containers. But if we're to intercept this shipment we would need to know the container number. And for all we know, it could be a perfectly legal arms shipment."

"Two men are dead," Rand reminded him. "And the second victim was impersonating the first one. Somehow that doesn't seem perfectly legal to me."

"His brother insists Rosco was not involved in any illegal activity."

Rand had forgotten about the brother for the moment. "Where can I find Frederick Mathers?"

"He's a tour guide, not nearly so successful as his brother. His office is here at Cleopatra Travel, but he conducts tours all over the country, especially along the Nile."

After they parted, Rand suddenly remembered he was meeting Leila at the museum. He hurried to a taxi and arrived at the museum only about fifteen minutes late for their noon meeting. "I was beginning to worry," Leila said as he hurried up the steps to her side.

"It's a long story. I'll tell you about it over lunch."

Leila listened in silence to his account of finding the body and phoning Captain Simbel. Then she asked, "What do you intend to do now?"

"I'd like to meet the brother. We could look up his address and go talk to him about a tour."

"Jeffrey, whatever's happening here doesn't concern us. It's up to the police to find the killer and this shipment of weapons, if it is illegal. You're retired, remember?"

"I've been retired for years."

When they'd finished lunch, Leila was ready to continue her museum visit. "They have some fine Roman mosaics from the city's early days."

"If I spend a couple of hours with you in the museum will you come with me to visit Frederick Mathers?"

"Why do you need me?"

"We're a retired couple inquiring about tours. It would seem odd if I went alone."

She agreed with some reluctance and by four o'clock they were at the Cleopatra Travel Service where Mathers worked. Each desk had a nameplate, so it was easy enough to find Frederick. Rand explained that they were in Egypt for a week and wanted to see some of the more unusual attractions.

Frederick Mathers was clean-shaven, with blue eyes and blond hair only beginning to lose its luster. Rand suspected he'd be a popular guide for English ladies wanting a bit of romance on their holiday. "Was there anything special that interested you?" he asked.

"Well," Leila said, "since this is the Cleopatra Travel Service I was wondering about her emerald mine."

"A fabulous place," Mathers agreed. "It's east of Aswan, near the Red Sea. That's some distance from here, but worth the trip."

"Are the emeralds still there?" Rand wondered.

"Sadly, no. The mine was worked out centuries ago. Emeralds were mined there by Greeks in the time of Alexander. Some say a rare perfect emerald was worth more than a diamond of the same size. They certainly were Cleopatra's favorite gem."

On cue, Leila asked casually, "Are you any relation to Rosco Mathers?"

Frederick's face seemed to freeze. "He was my brother."

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"We met him once on a previous visit. We were saddened to hear of his death."

"So was I, naturally. We weren't that close, but he was still my brother."

"Someone told us he might have been murdered," Rand said.

"He was involved in lots of things."

"Drugs?"

Frederick shook his head. "Arms shipments, mostly. It was a bad business to be in. You could get killed by either side."

"But profitable, if you stay alive."

Frederick pulled out some tour brochures, perhaps deciding he'd already said too much about his brother. "The Nile cruise is always popular, and there are numerous stops along the way. We could even include Cleopatra's mines if you wish."

Rand glanced at his watch, as if remembering a prior engagement. "Dear, we have to meet our friends back at the hotel in thirty minutes. Perhaps we should come back here tomorrow."

"Take these along," the blue-eyed Englishman urged. "Here's my card. I can guarantee you a fabulous tour whichever one you choose."

After dinner at a fancy restaurant called the Sea Gull, they returned to the hotel to find Irene Duggen waiting for them in the lobby. "I wanted to talk to you about Rosco."

They found a secluded table in the cocktail lounge and Rand ordered after-dinner drinks. "He was your ex-husband."

Irene nodded. "It's no big secret, but Captain Simbel said he told you, and I wanted to set the record straight."

"There's no need to," Rand assured her. "I'm not investigating anything. I've been retired from government service for some time. My wife and I are on holiday."

She smiled knowingly. "When we were married Rosco once told me that no one ever retires from British Intelligence."

"I wish it were true. I'd still be getting paid every month."

"Rosco told me he was worried. There were some Middle Eastern types trying to kill him. He hired a man once to impersonate him and the man got shot in the arm. I suppose it was the dangers of his business that led to our divorce. I was afraid I might be kidnapped or worse if I stayed married to him."

"Do you have any idea of who died at his office this morning?"

She shook her head. "That's why Simbel called, to tell me about it."

"You mentioned Rosco had enemies. He must have mentioned some names."

Irene considered that. "One name, the man he feared the most. He was called Kraken, after the legendary sea monster. I don't know that anyone knows his real name, but he and Rosco competed in the arms trade."

Rand considered the possibilities. "If this Kraken killed Rosco and came upon that coded message, he may have learned of my presence in Alexandria and hired me to decode it."

"I don't know what to think," she admitted. "I just wanted to be straight with you."

He tended to believe her, but later, back in their hotel room, Leila had doubts. "Why should she worry about what you know or don't know?"

"She seems to believe I'm here in an official capacity."

"I think we should forget the entire business," she decided. "Captain Simbel seems quite capable of finding out who killed both the real and the imposter Rosco Mathers. You did your part. You decoded that message."

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"But the numbers were missing," Rand grumbled. "If the message has any meaning at all, it's that a shipment of illegal arms is sitting on the Alexandria docks in one of those cargo containers."

"If that's the case, it's his job to find it, not yours."

He went to bed unsatisfied by the turn of events. There was something about the whole business he didn't like. Maybe it was just that Irene Duggen had been so cooperative.

Mainly to mollify Leila, Rand tried to put the Mathers puzzle out of his mind the following day. They toured the city's Turkish Quarter and the Palace of Ras el-Tin, returning to the hotel in late afternoon. The previous day's murder of the Mathers imposter was front-page news, but the police had been unable to identify him as yet.

"At least Captain Simbel has stopped bothering us," Leila said.

"Maybe. Unless he's got someone following us."

He was only half joking, and on the way back from dinner that night he had a glimpse of someone on their tail. He told Leila to go on up to the room and waited in the shadow of the pillars outside the hotel. After a moment a slender shape appeared and Rand reached out to grab it. "Looking for me?" he asked.

He recognized Nessim, the young Egyptian who worked in Irene's shop. The man was startled and mumbled some excuse. "I was only out for a walk."

"You were following us and I want to know why."

"I—I might have some information to sell you."

Rand backed him against the pillar. "What sort of information?"

"Rosco Mathers was probably killed by the man known as Kraken. I can take you to his house."

"I'm not a policeman. You should tell Captain Simbel if you know anything."

"The police don't pay for information. If I told Simbel I knew anything he'd beat it out of me before he paid me."

"I don't pay for information either, Nessim. I didn't even get paid for the job I did."

"Simbel might pay a reward for his capture."

"Then you collect it, not me."

"I must live in Alexandria after his capture. His people would seek me out and kill me. You could be safely away by that time."

Time.

What was it about that word? Mathers's father had been the Wizard of Time.

"How much do you want to take me there?" he asked the young man. In his mind he could almost hear Leila shouting, "No!"

Nessim took a deep breath. "One hundred British pounds?" In the streets of Alexandria informers came cheap.

"All right," Rand said. "Half now and half when we get there. Let me call upstairs and tell my wife I'll be late."

He used the house phone in the lobby, and told Leila he was going off with Nessim. "Are you out of your mind? You could end up like Mathers."

"Let's hope that doesn't happen."

They went in Nessim's cramped little French sedan, bumping over a secondary road out of the city, running close to the sea. "We are heading toward Agami," Nessim told him. "It is a popular resort area now, surrounded by groves of fig trees, with a long bay for boating."

"How do you know Kraken will be here?"

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"I don't, but I know the man who sold him the place. It's a perfect hideout in a busy resort area where he can mingle with the crowd and pass unnoticed. I'll park here. We should approach the house from the rear, through the fig orchard."

Rand followed him through the darkness, moving carefully between the rows of trees. Their goal was a moderate-sized house ablaze with lights, but in the darkness the path was treacherous. Suddenly Nessim cursed and went down. "Cobra!" he shouted.

Rand flicked on the little penlight he carried and saw the serpent at Nessim's leg. He kicked at it, realizing the utter foolishness of such a move. "Did it bite you?" he asked.

"In the leg. I stumbled right on it in the dark."

"Do you have a mobile phone, a cell phone?"

"Yes." He was breathing hard, more from fear than pain. The snake had vanished into the darkness.

"What's your emergency number here?" Rand asked, taking the phone from him and punching in the number Nessim gave him.

Suddenly a powerful spotlight targeted them from the house. A tall figure with a shotgun appeared on the back porch. "Don't move, either of you," the man commanded.

"He's been bitten by a cobra," Rand shouted. "We need help!"

"Put down that phone or I'll shoot."

Rand let it drop without breaking the connection, then stood up with his hands in the air. "Can I help him to his feet?" he asked.

"Slowly and carefully." The shotgun never wavered.

As Nessim stood up he gasped in pain. "It's starting to hurt."

"He needs immediate treatment or he'll die," Rand insisted.

"If he brought you here he deserves to die. You will join him."

"You don't know who I am."

"That puts us on a level playing field," the man with the shotgun said. "You don't know who I am, either."

"I think I do. I think you're the twice-dead Rosco Mathers."

He motioned them inside then, keeping the shotgun aimed. Nessim could barely walk and his leg was beginning to swell around the bite. "Sit down," Mathers ordered. "Before I kill you I'd like to hear what you have to say." The lights in the room revealed a stout Englishman with a few weeks' growth of beard. He'd shaved his head and looked quite different from the photo Rand had seen earlier.

"That snakebite has to be treated," Rand insisted.

"First tell me what you know."

"Knowing and guessing aren't exactly the same thing, but I think this is what happened. You had an especially valuable shipment of arms coming through the port here, in a sealed container. The man known as Kraken wanted to hijack it if he could. He started out by killing you, but he got your double by mistake—a man your ex-wife told us you sometimes used. You knew enough to plant your wallet on the man, dump him in the sea, and go into hiding, pretending to be dead. The body had been in the water several days when it was found, and your wallet was on it. Since you were missing, they accepted that it was you without the need for further forensic testing."

Nessim had collapsed on the couch, holding his swollen leg. Rand wanted to

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cut open the wound, but remembered a doctor telling him once that such action could be dangerous. "Go on," Mathers urged.

"Kraken, meanwhile, believing you were dead, gained entry to your office and searched for a clue to the location of the arms shipment. He found the coded message but was unable to decipher it. That's where things stood until he learned that a retired British cipher expert was in town. He invited me to your office, pretending to be you, and gave me the message to decipher. When he returned to the office to phone me yesterday, you followed him in and killed him. With him dead, you decided to hide out here, at his house."

"You knew all this?"

"It was the clocks," Rand admitted. "All those clocks on the wall behind your desk. In an earlier photograph they were all set at the traditional twenty minutes past eight, and that was how they were on my second visit, when I supposedly found you dead. I had to ask myself why they'd been changed from the various times they showed on my first visit and who changed them. The one thing the coded message didn't reveal was the number of the cargo container that held the arms shipment, or the recipient's name. That must have come in a separate message to you. They're usually long numbers, difficult to remember, and you didn't want to risk writing them down. So I think you set those clocks, probably using the more accurate hour hand, to indicate the number, with one digit on each clock face."

"Why couldn't Kraken have done it?"

"Because he didn't even know what the message said. He hired me to translate it, and died before I could deliver the message to him. But the clocks were set back to their original display by that time. Since Kraken wouldn't have done it, the times must have been altered by his killer, the one who changed them in the first place. That could only have been you, and it told me you were still alive."

Mathers backed away and lifted the shotgun. "I'm selling that shipment to a wealthy buyer tomorrow. I'll be out of here then, starting a new life far away. Too bad I'll have to kill you both."

The words were barely out of his mouth when the window behind him was shattered by a blast of gunfire. Mathers lived only long enough for a startled expression to appear on his face. Captain Simbel and his men were inside a few seconds later.

"We were behind you," he told Rand. "Leaving your mobile phone on led us right to you."

"That's Rosco Mathers, Captain. He killed Kraken and was hiding out here. I'll tell you all about it. And Nessim here needs treatment for a cobra bite on his leg."

Simbel's men carried Nessim out to the car. Rand ran though it all again, but when he'd finished the captain merely shook his head. "Much too complicated. In my report Mathers stays dead and this man is Kraken. It reads better that way."

"What kind of a solution is that?"

Simbel merely smiled. "It is the Alexandrian solution." ●

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THE JAILER

by Janice Law

Left to himself, the idea would never have entered his mind, Amos Bidwell knew, and, therefore, it could not truly be his own. *Lead us not into temptation:* Doesn't that suggest that we have to be led astray and so are not wholly at fault? Perhaps not at fault at all, he thought, as he worked to settle his conscience. This was not a difficult task, considering what a flexible and slippery thing his conscience was and how vast and particular his knowledge of Biblical texts.

To give aid to the imprisoned was enjoined somewhere, and he, Amos Bidwell, certainly did that as master of the prison. Now here, he told himself, was simply the case of a prisoner—the very shoemaker, in fact, who was keeping up a steady tap-tapping behind him—requesting a little extra assistance.

Across the yard Bidwell could see the glow of the forge in the neighboring shed, where two more of his charges were forging nails. Nails, shoes, a little copper ore: It was his pride that the prison paid its way with a modest profit left over for his own use. *The laborer is worthy of his hire,* as he liked to say and frequently did.

He had been hired, in fact, on the strength of this facility. Given the peculiar nature of the prison, an old copper mine with healthy but dark underground cells, the governor had felt it vital that the jailer be a man capable of piety as well as command. Bidwell, a soldier in the late Revolution, had the military credentials for the latter and his affection for scripture, suggesting the former, sealed the deal.

Certainly, he was no worse than the other candidates. He was not cruel; he fed the prisoners adequately; he reduced the number of escapes, and he saw that the workshops turned out a steady stream of goods. But, inevitably, he, too, was a sinner: Adam's curse, as Bidwell liked to say. His share of the general fall from grace was greed. He loved money. The making and spending of it were both agreeable to him, but his real passion was accumulation. He loved nothing more than a hoard of shiny coins. The shoemaker knew that.

Connecticut resident Janice Law's new story takes us to Old Newgate Prison, originally built as a copper mine and used as a prison from 1773 to 1827. The historical setting is well-evoked and the atmosphere is decidedly creepy, as we would expect from the Edgar-nominated creator of the Anna Peters mystery series. Ms. Law has recent stories out in the anthology *Still Waters* and in our sister publication, *AHMM*. She's currently at work on a new mystery novel. †

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Chad Fuller was a small craftsman who'd fallen on hard times and stolen a few horses. He'd been in prison eight years, and because he was a good shoemaker, he'd managed to accumulate a nice little store of money, which he wore in a bag around his waist. Many times Bidwell had listened to that subdued clinking and thought it a shame that those coins belonged to a felon.

Then one day out of the blue—literally, they were standing at the door of the shoemaker's shed admiring a blue sky fresh swept of clouds—Fuller made his proposition. "I'm longing for the stars at night," he said, and Bidwell half guessed what was coming.

"Alas, Fuller, it will be years before you see the stars at night."

"Though men have left here—and not just by the gate or the grave."

Bidwell should have ended the conversation right there and never *harkened unto the counsel of the ungodly,* as the Good Book so aptly warns. But he told himself that a jailer cannot know too much about his prisoners, that if there was some scheme afoot, he must investigate. "That is true."

"I will be an old man in a few years and too feeble to start over. I could pay for a little assistance."

"Much good it would do me," said Bidwell, tipping his hand in the instant. "I'd lose an experienced shoemaker with no one likely to take your place."

But Fuller persisted. He had a good store of coins—more than the jailer knew. He was not such a fool as to show all he had, and so on and so forth, until Amos fell into temptation like Eve. *The devil beguiled me,* she said, and didn't that suggest a supernatural force behind all temptation?

There was no doubt the shoemaker had led him into evil, and now there was the devil to pay. The shoemaker had delivered a good ten dollars in the best gold coins to him and promised more if he left a rope hanging down into the cavern where the men slept at night. A foolish thing for any jailer to do, and how was it to be accomplished?

Bidwell had hoped, expected really, that the time would never be right. Then one of his charges was released and two took sick and had to be moved to the upper cells. For a night or so, the shoemaker would be confined alone, and Bidwell agreed he'd leave a rope.

The main ladder would be drawn up, of course. It led directly to the quarters Bidwell shared with his wife, Lydia, an astute and sharp-eyed lady. But the rope, lowered just that morning to haul up the sick men's blankets for washing, could be left dangling, an oversight possible when there was sickness and records to keep and a thousand other things on a man's mind.

Then Chad Fuller, who had tempted him, would get away. True, Amos would have gotten as much money as possible from him, but an escape would be to the detriment of the community and to his, Bidwell's, own reputation. There seemed no way around that conclusion. As a result, he was surly with Lydia at dinner and stumbled and nearly bashed his knee on his rounds of the workshops.

He wanted the money Fuller had promised him, and he wanted to keep the man confined. Two incompatible things unless— Bidwell was locking up the door of the shoemaker's shop when he saw a solution, and, for a moment, he stood quite still, absorbing the idea and the sounds of the twilight. A bat twittered overhead and a dog barked somewhere beyond the high brick walls of the prison. *I'm not responsible for the rope,* he thought. *I gave no guarantees about the rope.*

Before he could think more, he went back to his quarters and through to the

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shaft. The rope still dangled into the murk, and Bidwell glanced quickly over his shoulder to see if the prisoners in the hospital cells had noticed his entrance. One was snoring, the other twitching and moaning with fever. Bidwell smiled: Out of their heads, both of them, and wasn't that a sign? *We are ever in the hands of Providence,* he told himself, as he slashed partway through the rope with his knife. *Let God decide.*

Bidwell rechecked the prison doors before returning to the apartment he shared with Lydia, who was knitting in front of one of the long windows.

"You are late." She put down her needles and stood up. "I must check on the patients."

"All asleep," he said quickly. "Nature's best medicine. I looked in on them," he added, though this was all unnecessary. As jailer, he answered to no one in the prison; if he were longer at his rounds than usual it was no business of hers. But he knew that it was a mistake to have drawn attention to anything unusual, even to so small a thing as checking a sick prisoner at an odd hour. It would behoove him now to be careful.

She gave him a close look and shrugged. Lydia was several years older than he was, vigorous but not particularly well favored. She had a long, sallow face and a lean, straight frame. She was clever, too, which Bidwell felt unnecessary in a woman and dubious in a wife, with the quite unbiblical habit of speaking her mind and broaching opinions on everything.

Admittedly, the parts of the jail under her command—the kitchen, the hospital cells, the little garden—were well managed. You couldn't fault Lydia for work nor for her chief attraction, the dowry she'd brought him, either, but Bidwell often felt that he had been happier before he came under her gimlet eye. He felt her watching him now, and he had the unpleasant sensation that she was turning over in her mind everything he had said and done for several days.

"We'll not waste a lamp tonight," he said, as soon as the pink evening light faded, and they went early to bed with the heavy door between their rooms and the upper floor of the prison bolted shut. Though no sound from below could penetrate that double oak planking, he turned and tossed and waked a half-dozen times in the night, thinking, hearing, not hearing, imagining—what, he couldn't have said. In the morning, his lady remarked that he had spent an uneasy night, as if, she added, there was something on his mind.

"Nothing except this beautiful morning," said Bidwell, but his breath was short, and he fumbled with his bootlaces as he hurried to dress. He wanted to be first into the main room to pull up the rope. If it was intact and the shoemaker gone, he'd hide the evidence; if Providence had let the rope part, the cut end must go into the fire. He hadn't thought of that earlier, having left everything in Other Hands, as he phrased it, but now he must bestir himself.

Fortunately, Lydia was busy filling the washbasins and collecting the chamber pots. In the few minutes in which she crossed the yard, Bidwell hurried to the mine shaft. The ladder was still up. And the rope? He could see the cord running down into the darkness and felt a surge of mingled irritation and relief. But when he stepped closer, the breath almost went out of his body. The rope ended a foot or so below the lip of the opening. And down below, in the faint circle of morning light, was a darkness of blood such as he remembered from the war and the shoemaker's body, twisted as from a bayonet thrust or a cannon ball.

He heard Lydia behind him. "Have Arthur's boy run for the constable," he

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shouted without turning around. "Quickly, woman!"

As soon as he heard the door close, Bidwell struggled to untie the rope, but he couldn't seem to get his fingers working. Instead, he ran to let down the ladder. Lantern in hand, he descended into the mine, with its familiar odor of cold, damp, urine, and metal, and made his way over the worn and irregular bedrock to the shoemaker's body. It seemed only a matter of minutes before he heard the voice of the constable and the rattle and creak of the metal treads as the heavy guardian of the law descended, but that was just the pressure of his emotions. He'd had time, Bidwell discovered later, to convey the last of the shoemaker's money to his own pocket.

"A bad business," said the constable, wheezing a little from his exertions and picking his way carefully over the wet and uneven stone.

"I blame myself," said Bidwell. "We have fever and we'd raised the sick men's bedding. Somehow Fuller was able to reattach the rope."

"He was destined for the rope one way or the other," said the constable, who took a dim view of human frailty and seemed to accept Bidwell's account without question. While the constable examined the body, Bidwell coiled the rope to hide the partially cut end and fetched a stretcher.

Bringing Fuller's body to the surface was a miserable job, because rigor had set in, and there was much blood. The constable's chief contribution was to overweight the ladder, so that Bidwell had to keep a sharp eye on the support bolts. In the end, even Lydia had to lend a hand, the other prisoners being too feverish and ill to help.

A bad thing, that, Bidwell knew. Handling the smashed corpse was not something she'd easily forget, and now that it had happened—he didn't admit exactly what "it" was even to himself—the sooner the matter was closed, the better.

Of course, there was the business of the rope. All the time they struggled to keep the corpse from tumbling back down, Bidwell worried about the rope. Surely the constable would ask about rotten cords and the cost of decent hemp and notice how half the rope was frayed and half severed? But when they finally got the stretcher up into the prison office, the gasping constable seemed fully occupied with the unusual excitement. He shouted orders to Arthur, the under jailer, and Arthur's boy, and forgot himself so far as to command both Bidwell and Lydia.

Bidwell cared only that the constable avoid awkward questions; Lydia answered back smartly, though she looked rather sick. Certainly the fall had made a mess of the shoemaker.

"Hard to replace," Bidwell said as a distraction. "God have mercy on him, he was a good worker."

The constable harrumphed, indicating either assent or dissent—he was a politician to the depth of his soul—but Lydia said, "The mills of God grind exceedingly fine," which was true, if presumptuous. She looked straight at Bidwell as she spoke, which was unnerving, especially when he discovered later that she'd had the presence of mind to remove the last few feet of rope.

Later that day, he looked around discreetly for the evidence, but found no trace of it and dared not ask. To ask would be to draw attention to the importance of that piece of hemp and to his anxiety. Perhaps fortunately for Bidwell, there was much to be done before the shoemaker could be laid in the local potter's field. For one thing, Lydia proposed a small cross with Fuller's name and dates carved into it.

"Quite unnecessary," Bidwell said.

"He was in our custody," his lady replied with a significant look.

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So that was another hour in the carpenter's shop, supervising a still-shaky and semiliterate thief's efforts to construct a monument. The shoemaker had been in the ground a week before Bidwell felt he could make a real search. He went through the garden shed, Lydia's domain, and tore up the now-vacant hospital beds, and poked about in the big wood-burning stove for any remnants. Nothing.

Still, as far as he knew, he was in the clear. Chad Fuller's death was declared "misadventure while trying to escape from lawful confinement." Bidwell's only worry should have been to conceal the shoemaker's pitiful fortune, a task that proved harder than he'd anticipated, because Lydia, who had never showed much interest in personal adornment, suddenly seemed to have developed little wants, more or less expensive.

Not many days after the internment, she needed new Sunday boots.

"What's wrong with your old ones?" Bidwell asked, though he had complained that the reddish leather was too bright for the Sabbath.

"They've gone in the sole," she said. "And the shoemaker isn't here to mend them."

Bidwell wanted to say they'd have a shoemaker soon enough, but there was something about the way she mentioned Fuller that unsettled him, and he opened his purse.

Next, there was a chair she fancied. "You know I do a lot of sewing in the evening," she said, "and really the jailer's wife should have something better than one of those old rush-bottomed things from the shoemaker's shop."

Though it had actually come from the carpenter's bench, Bidwell did not want to argue anything concerning the shoemaker, and an order for a fine upholstered chair went off to Hartford.

It was the same when the peddler passed with a length of green silk. "To match my low shoes," she said.

Bidwell wanted to say it matched her greedy eyes, but by that time he did not dare. Unlike the blockheaded constable, she had guessed, and now, Bidwell feared, she would make him pay, waste his work and his profit and grind him up like the proverbial mills of— he could not finish the thought. He had been led into temptation and this was the result: gnawing anxiety and mounting expense.

Worse, he thought, watching her a few nights later as she sewed up a fine new dress, he had betrayed himself. Had he dared say they hadn't the money, had he held firm that there was none, she might have come to doubt her own conclusions. Might, though he had to admit to himself that Lydia rarely altered her mind. His readiness to buy for her—so unlike his usual fiscal caution—had betrayed him.

Well, there would be no more such treats. None. When she asked the next time, for some new pots and pans the peddler had from Boston, Bidwell shook his head. *Place not your trust in earthly things,* he said. Lydia gave him a long look without saying anything, and Bidwell congratulated himself that he had spoken just in time.

But in the next few days she grew quiet, spreading a silence through the apartment which Bidwell soon found more unsettling than her former chatter. More than once, he thought he heard the tap-tapping of the shoemaker's hammer behind her knitting needles, and daily he found himself opening the shoemaker's leather purse and counting out the money, before hiding it away again somewhere in the prison.

That he'd had to spend part of it troubled him, that he had it at all troubled him more, but that he might in some way lose it troubled him most. He had

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moments when he thought that if he could drop the shoemaker's coins down the well, he might be saved, and he went as far as to lean over and study the black circle of water late one night. But no, for then it would all have been for nothing, the darkness on the dark stones, the fragment of rope, this anxiety.

Bidwell began to lose his genial ways, to shout at the prisoners, to curse Lydia, to be short with Arthur, and to ignore his active, useful boy. He grew agitated whenever he saw the prisoners talking together (what might the subject be?) and he grew to hate any sound of hammering. It seemed to him that they must all know, or at least suspect, and that, like Lydia, they were just waiting for any slip that would expose his guilt.

As a result, he became secretive, spending hours in the depths of the old mine, hiding and moving and hiding again his store of money. He favored the punishment cells, right at the back of the main shaft, where no daylight ever entered, where his lantern smoked and cast tall shadows on the low stone ceiling, where a man might fall asleep and wake to believe he was in his own tomb.

Every time Lydia was out—working in the garden or hanging out the wash or visiting a neighbor—he went through the apartment, searching for the tell-tale end of rope. Surely, she had burned it, as a good wife would, but Bidwell wasn't entirely sure she was a good wife. And if she wasn't, why would she keep it? Perhaps to threaten him if one day he should refuse her something. At first he feared that, and then the idea made him hopeful. Let her do it: He would take the rope from her and put it in the fire.

With that in mind, Bidwell attempted to provoke his wife. He let himself be irritable, not very hard when she carried the sound of the shoemaker's hammer within her silences. He criticized her and made unreasonable demands, but Lydia was not drawn. She said yes or no and never answered back, so that he found himself shouting loud enough to carry across the prison and threatening any inmate who showed signs of listening.

Then one summer day, he had to ride several miles to inspect some timber needed for the new mine shaft he planned in lieu of the shoemaker's shop. No skilled artisan had arrived at the prison, and Bidwell had made no attempt to have another prisoner trained, feeling the tapping from the shop, and even the smell of tanned leather, would be unendurable.

When he returned in the early afternoon he found their apartment empty. Lydia was not in the garden either, nor busy in the wash house. He walked out to the gate and looked up and down the road, knowing she sometimes stopped by a neighbor's or visited the farmer's wife, who had a new baby. Still, she should be home by now. There was no dinner ready; laundry had been left hanging out on the lines; Bidwell began to have an anxious feeling.

He went into their room and looked in her trunk. No green silk dress. No fine low shoes. What had she done? He remembered passing a peddler's wagon on his way out. Could she have persuaded him to take her on to the stage? Not likely—peddlers didn't look for trouble. But, as *money is the root of all evil,* might she have bribed him? Might she?

With what? He kept her short, and even careful as she was, she'd not have saved much from the household, unless—Bidwell gave a cry of grief and fear. Could she have found his store, when he had been unable to find the rope? With her always underfoot in the apartment, he'd had to search a few moments at a time, while *she* would have had plenty of opportunity when he'd been out in the sheds, down

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in the mine, away seeing to the thousand and one things that needed doing.

He grabbed a lantern and ran to the ladder, his breath coming in gasps. Down the iron rungs, the rust sticking on his damp palms, to reach the little well of light where the prisoners bivouacked like soldiers with their bedding, lamps, and bags of tobacco, with Ben's penny whistle, Pete's whittling. Heart pounding, Bidwell moved across the damp, sloping floor, past the first exploratory workings of the new shaft, to the punishment cell.

He had kept his store in this area of the mine for some time, correctly guessing that the prisoners had no desire to go anywhere near the dark cavern, and further protecting his money by moving it obsessively from one well-concealed cranny to another. He'd shifted the leather bag so many times that when he put his hand into the narrow opening just inside the cell door and found the cavity empty, he was not too surprised.

Of course, inside this time. There were a variety of places. He mustn't panic: *Seek and ye shall find!* Bidwell stumbled inside the cell, patting the wall, running his frantic fingers into this hiding place and that, shifting a loose piece of rock here, and digging through the dirt and rubble there. It couldn't be gone, it couldn't be. Lydia never descended the ladder. Never. And as for the prisoners—if one of them had found it, he'd soon have it back. No, wait! He realized that he'd gotten turned around. He'd hidden his purse on the left, not the right-hand side and forgotten it in the foolishness of the moment.

Bidwell lifted the lantern and confidently put his hand into the hiding place, but once again found no purse, no jingle of coins. Nothing but a tapping which was surely water dripping somewhere. Surely.

His store was here. It had to be. Bidwell circled the cell again and then, desperate, entered the worked-out shaft, holding the lantern high overhead. He searched along the floor, along the walls, then back, checking the support posts. Nothing, nothing but the tapping which was only water dripping. Only.

Back once again to the cell. He had been too hasty the first time, Bidwell thought. The purse had perhaps slipped further down in a crack. The rock was alive, as the old miners said, always shifting and changing and trying to thrust up into the daylight like the evidence of things done.

Don't think about that! His hand was once again in the opening near the door. There was something, he felt something with the very tips of his fingers and nearly wept with relief. He'd have to get up higher, though. He needed some sort of stepstool. Hadn't he seen a bench? A seat? The carpenter had surely made one for himself.

How foolish to have given up so easily, to have despaired so quickly! Bidwell climbed the slope of the bedrock toward the faint light and the prisoners' belongings. Was that a stool? A bench? Yes. A good piece of timber went into it, and Bidwell thought he would have a talk with Pete about making furniture for his own use. He started back down the slope, where, overbalanced by the heavy bench, he slipped twice on the damp rock; the second time, he dropped the lantern, which bounced and went out.

But though he should have gone back, Bidwell was now in too much suspense. He felt his way along the wall, down to the fitting of the heavily barred door, across the opening to the latch on the other side. He found the crack, touched the contents within, and quickly set down the bench and climbed upon it.

Steadying himself against the rock, he reached up on tiptoes and pushed his

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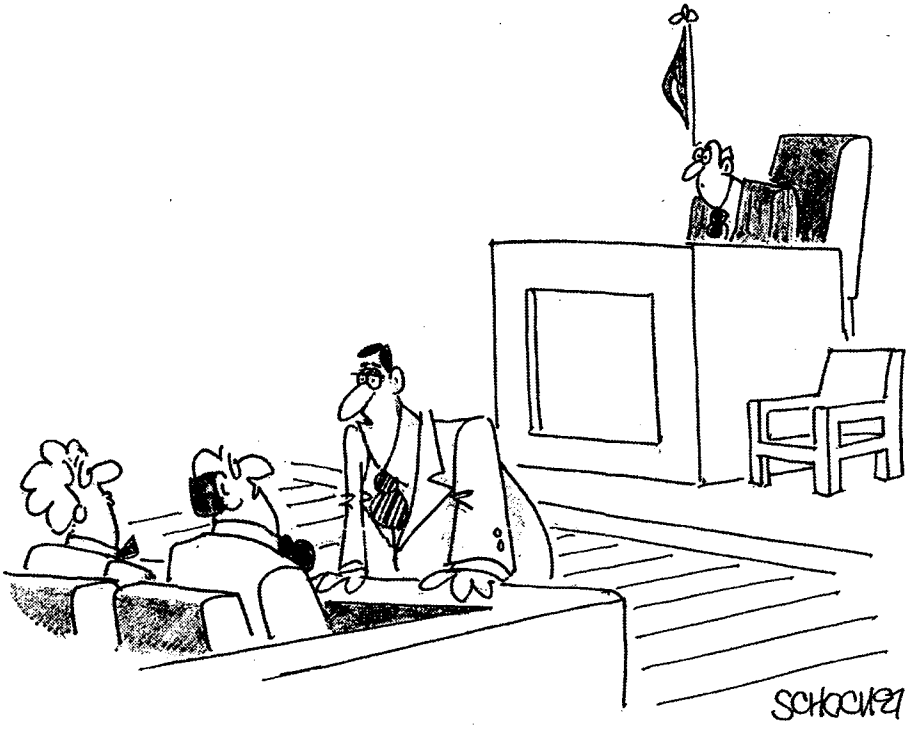
hand far down into the fissure in the stone, where he touched something too rough and prickly to be his purse. And too long, much too long. With a cry of horror, Bidwell drew out the rope and threw it away like a snake, the very serpent of the Garden, upsetting as he did so the bench and tumbling down onto the rock floor with one leg bent under him.

It was several moments, maybe longer, before he came to himself, his chest and shoulders aching and his right leg on fire. Lydia had taken his store and left the rope, the same, the very same, and everything he'd risked had been for nothing, for worse than nothing, for he could not shift his leg. He shouted for help, called for Arthur, commanded Pete and Ben to come to the ladder.

No response. They were not listening, or perhaps they did not hear him over the sound of their work, which merged in his ears with the steady tap-tapping in the darkness, the tapping which he had thought was water dripping, but which he now knew was the shoemaker's hammer. ●



"Don't be influenced by the evidence. Make up your own mind."

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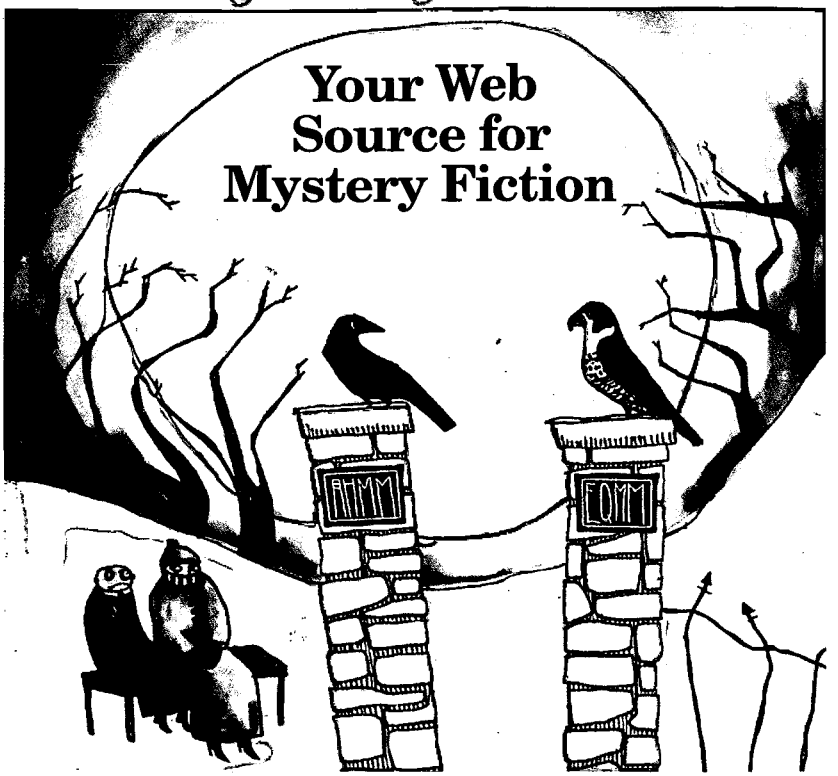

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